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Janet Ross's Intergenerational Life Writing: Female Intellectual Legacy through Memoirs, Correspondence, and Reminiscences

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Janet Ross's Intergenerational Life Writing: Female Intellectual Legacy through Memoirs, Correspondence, and Reminiscences

Three Generations of English Women: Memoirs and Correspondence of Susannah Taylor, Sarah Austin, and Lady Duff Gordon by Janet Ross is a distinctive, but underestimated, Victorian family biography. It narrates the lives of her mother, Lucie Duff Gordon, her grandmother, Sarah Austin, and identifies her great-grandmother, Susannah Taylor, as the originator of this female line of intellectual inheritance, which Ross is indebted to. This article examines how Ross's work motivates women's intellectual endeavours by presenting a positive example of female intellectual legacy sustained successfully by foremothers. A Victorian writer, historian and translator, she recognises in her maternal heritage a model of intergenerational mentorship and interaction that promotes intellectual engagement, exchange and transformations. *Three Generations of English Women* shows that female intergenerational legacy is central not only in uncovering the contribution of Ross's foremothers but also to a deeper understanding of the development of nineteenth-century women's intellectual lives.

Keywords: legacy, generation, matrilineal, biography

Janet Ross's *Three Generations of English Women: Memoirs and Correspondence of Susannah Taylor, Sarah Austin, and Lady Duff Gordon* (1893) is a distinctive, but underestimated, Victorian family biography that narrates the lives of her great-grandmother, Susannah Taylor (née Cook, 1755-1823), her grandmother, Sarah Austin (née Taylor, 1793-1867), and her mother, Lucie Duff Gordon (née Austin, 1821-1869), through family anecdotes, memoirs, biographical sketches and their correspondence. Like her mother and grandmother, Janet Ross (née Duff Gordon, 1842-1927) was a skilful translator and travel writer, a journalist and an historian. Her keen interest in correspondence is essential to her life writing: the multigenerational family biography that is at the centre of this article; her two autobiographies (*Early*

Days Recalled, 1891, and *The Fourth Generation: Reminiscences by Janet Ross*, 1912); and her history of the Medici dynasty through the lives of Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo de' Medici, are all enriched by her subjects' original correspondence. In *Three Generations of English Women: Memoirs and Correspondence of Susannah Taylor, Sarah Austin, and Lady Duff Gordon*, she demonstrates the contribution of her foremothers as writers and cultural mediators who promoted dialogue and exchange by hosting significant intellectual circles. Through their correspondence she asserts them as models of female agency and advocates of women's education and intellectual endeavours.

This article first examines *Three Generations of English Women* as a collective, matrilineal biography that identifies Susannah Taylor as the originator of a female line of intellectual inheritance which three generations of English women are indebted to, including the biographer, and establishes the reputation of Sarah Austin and Lucie Duff Gordon as women of letters. Secondly, it focuses on the intergenerational correspondence between mothers and daughters to study how, in Ross's family, three successive generations of mothers successfully stimulated their daughters to widen their intellectual and professional horizons. In order to emphasise the significance of Ross's multigenerational biography as 'a stimulus to women' ('The Letters of Learned Ladies and Famous Men' 3), this article studies the 1893-second edition of *Three Generations of English Women*, which was extended and revised. The first was published in 1888 with the title, *Three Generations of English Women: Memoirs and Correspondence of Mrs. John Taylor, Mrs. Sarah Austin, and Lady Duff Gordon*. The differences between the two editions are essential to understanding how Ross recognises in her maternal heritage not only women's lives

that must be recorded and remembered but also a model of intergenerational mentorship promoting women's intellectual engagement and writing.

I argue that, in employing a multigenerational, matrilineal approach, Ross shows the support and guidance needed for women's successful intellectual undertakings and independence in the nineteenth century, and proposes her foremothers as suitable mentors for other generations of women. Her matrilineal legacy illustrates the kind of female tradition Virginia Woolf urges women to embrace by thinking 'back through our mothers' in *A Room of One's Own* in 1929 (69). Ross has a female 'tradition behind' (Woolf 69) her that gives her a sense of identity and history as a woman writer and she makes it accessible through life writing. By writing the lives of her foremothers together in a multigenerational biography, Ross establishes their legacy of exemplary, stimulating intellectual endeavour to which she bears witness as a recipient and anticipates the work on the history of women's writing that has been undertaken from first-wave feminism onwards.

Four generations of women's life writing

Until two recent biographies,¹ Ross has mostly been acknowledged as a muse of George Meredith (1828-1909) and a member of the late-nineteenth-century Anglo-Florentine community. Family memoirs and letters demonstrate that she inspired Rose Jocelyn, in *Evan Harrington* (1861), Janet Ilchester in *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1871), and 'the Lady, who "has that rare gift / To Beauty, Common Sense./"' (XXXI lines 13-14) in Meredith's most celebrated poem, *Modern Love* (1862) (Waterfield WAT: II: H: f7). It is her writing, her work as a biographer and historian in particular, that still demands at least as much attention as her

cosmopolitan and adventurous life. Ross authored twelve books, edited five and translated many into English from German, French, and Italian. Among them, together with her autobiography, *The Fourth Generation*, it is worth acknowledging *Italian Sketches* (1887), *The Land of Manfred* (1889), *Florentine Villas* (1901) and *Florentine Palaces and their Stories* (1905), *Lives of the Early Medici* (1910), and *The Story of Lucca* (1912), for they are valuable resources on Florentine history, the Anglo-Florentine community, and Italian cultural heritage, as well as enticing reading. Today she is mostly remembered for *Leaves from our Tuscan Kitchen, or How to cook vegetables* (1899).

The daughter of Sir Alexander Cornwall Duff Gordon (1811-1872) and Lucie Austin, at the age of eighteen Janet Duff Gordon married Henry James Ross (1820-1902), a friend of Austen Henry Layard (1815-1894) and his assistant during the discovery of the ancient Assyrian cities of Nineveh and Nimrud, in 1860. With him, she moved to Egypt in 1861 and then settled in Tuscany in 1869, where she lived until her death in 1927. Here, ‘she turned [Poggio Gherardo, in Settignano, near Florence] into one of the outstanding homes in Europe’ (Downing 4), where she hosted a salon attended by, for example, John Addington Symonds, Henry James, Marie Corelli, Robert Browning, Mark Twain, Bernard and Mary Berenson, Kenneth Clark and Edward Hutton, and facilitated an intergenerational, international network that promoted Anglo-Italian and transatlantic connections. Despite having started her career as a translator, at thirteen, and as a journalist, at twenty-one, when she became *The Times* correspondent from Egypt, Ross’s writing career flourished after she established her own salon, as her foremothers had done, and published *Three Generations of English Women*. Her matrilineal family biography inevitably increased her own profile and its success produced the money she needed to restore her ‘old

castellated' Poggio Gherardo (*Florentine Villas* 131). However, it is also apparent that, after writing her foremothers' lives together, Ross began to follow actively in their footsteps as a professional writer and a catalyst of an international intellectual network. Her projects increased in originality and complexity, as well as in volume. Her most significant work in terms of life and travel writing, and Florentine history was produced after the first publication of *Three Generations of English Women*.

Ross's great-grandmother, Susannah Taylor, was the originator of this line of intellectual women. In the late eighteenth century, she held a salon in Norwich where Sir James Mackintosh (1765-1832), the botanist Sir James Edward Smith (1759-1828), and the Unitarian philosopher Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867) 'might be seen' (*Three Generations* 21). The Taylors were related to the Martineaus, and the physician and writer Henry Reeve (1780-1814). Their house was a centre for Whig and Dissenting intellectual interests. Taylor did not show literary ambitions herself, but ensured her seven children, including two daughters, had a rigorous education as well as access to the intellectual discussions the family engaged with.

Susannah's daughter, Sarah, after marrying the legal philosopher John Austin (1790-1859) in 1819, made good use of the 'liberal and thorough education' (*Three Generations* 54) her mother had insisted on – an education which included Latin, French, Italian, and German. Austin became a notable translator, who sustained her family financially, and an esteemed salon hostess in London and Paris. Her intellectual circle included Sydney Smith, Thomas Carlyle, and John Stuart Mill, Harriet and George Grote, Jeremy Bentham, and the French intellectuals and statesmen François Guizot (1787-1874), and Barthélemy Saint Hilaire (1805-1895), whose work she translated. She also made available into English the scholarly work of the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and the French philosopher

Victor Cousin (1792-1867). The mother of an only daughter, she followed her own mother's example and ensured that Lucie Austin benefitted from a liberal education that encouraged a proficient knowledge of multiple modern languages. Lucie spent two years in Germany (1826-28) and a short time at 'a boys-school at Hampstead' (*Three Generations* 432), before beginning formal schooling. Today, together with Carlyle and Coleridge, Sarah Austin is recognised as a contributor to the introduction of 'German intellectual thought into England' (Johnston 59).²

In 1840, Lucie Austin married Alexander Duff Gordon at the age of nineteen, and took residency at what is today 15 Queen Anne's Gate in London. Her salon attracted 'Lord Lansdowne, Lord Monteaule, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot Warburton [...], Tennyson, Henry Taylor, Mrs Norton, Kinglake, and Tom Taylor' (*Three Generations* 446), as well as George Meredith and friends of her mother, such as Ranke and Guizot. Today she is remembered as the author of *Letters from the Cape* (1864) and *Letters from Egypt, 1863-65* (1865): two volumes collecting letters she sent to her family from countries she moved to in search of healthier conditions after she contracted tuberculosis. Like her mother, Duff Gordon began her writing career as a distinguished translator from the French and German. Prior to her acclaimed epistolary publications, she was renowned for her 'brilliant translation of *The Amber Witch* (1846) by Wilhelm Meinhold (1797-1851) (Wilde 142).

When Ross inherited Sarah Austin's correspondence from her father, she started her project as a collection of letters. By 1886 she had decided to write a multigenerational biography which would reclaim her great-grandmother's role as a knowledgeable mentor, and affirm the contribution of her grandmother and mother to British and European culture. In *The Fourth Generation*, Ross describes her determination in collecting 'what information [she] could about the Taylors of

Norwich, and [her] grandmother's and [her] mother's early life' (230). Her cousin Henry Reeve (1813-1895), at the time editor of the *Edinburgh Review* (1855-1895), wrote to her observing that her 'three Memoirs embrace about one hundred years of literary and social life' (231) and therefore required accurate historical and biographical knowledge. Ross followed Reeve's advice and researched her subjects by contacting friends and relatives who remembered them. Mostly successful in her requests for autobiographical sketches, anecdotes and correspondence, she traced her matrilineage from 1776, when her great-grandparents met, to her mother's death in 1869. In *The Fourth Generation*, Ross confesses she 'demurred' (290) at the idea of including her own story in *Three Generations of English Women*, but the second edition demonstrates her confidence in identifying herself as the fourth generation of the intellectual matrilineage she unfolds.

In a letter to Symonds, she announces that 'the contrast [between the two editions] is great' (*The Fourth Generation* 318). The first two noticeable differences are the subtitle and the frontispiece. In 1888, the first two-volume edition was published with a subtitle that listed her subjects as *Mrs. John Taylor, Mrs. Sarah Austin, and Lady Duff Gordon*. For the second edition of 1893, their marital titles were removed from the subtitle and the narrative: her female subjects were all introduced with their first as well as their second names. This adjustment still fulfilled patriarchal obligations by identifying them as married women but, it also privileged their individuality and captured Ross's matrilineal scope with further immediacy. The same impact was achieved by a new frontispiece that illustrated a matrilineal family tree by placing Susannah Taylor's portrait at the top of the page, those of Sarah Austin and Lucie Duff Gordon together in the centre, and Ross's at the bottom. In the first two-volume edition, Ross had included individual portraits of her foremothers

together with sketches by German painter, Julius Hübner (1806-1882), Richard Doyle, and Edward Lear. A Portrait of her grandmother by Amelia Opie in the first volume and one by John Linnell in the second were the frontispieces, giving Austin a central visual presence that reflected the dominance of her correspondence. In the one-volume second edition the number of illustrations was radically diminished and only drawings by Doyle in two of letters were kept. However, the new frontispiece presents a family portrait that envisages four generations of women, whose lives are interwoven, placing Taylor as the originator of the matrilineage and introducing the biographer, Ross, as her latest descendant.

In the second edition, Austin's correspondence still dominates, although, in an attempt to moderate the imbalance, Ross removed some of her letters (for example, by diminishing the number of those addressed to St Hilaire and Grote). She also increased the number of letters written by Taylor and Duff Gordon and incorporated in their entirety letters, which previously had been only partly cited, thus disclosing the identities of their addressees and offering an insight into the intimacy of greetings and signatures. These are mostly letters between mothers and daughters; hence, they represent important editorial changes that develop Ross's intergenerational matrilineal theme, and which will be examined in more detail shortly. Instead of finishing Taylor's biographical introduction with her marriage to John Taylor, Ross adds three new letters that cover an additional year prior to the beginning of her married life. These provide a glimpse of Susannah Cook as a young unmarried woman when she travelled from London to the North of England, and Scotland. They also uncover her writing skills and effectively complement Duff Gordon's letters from Egypt, because they both describe experiencing new landscapes, peoples, and ways of living. These

similarities intensify Ross's collective matrilineal framework that, in the conclusion, connects her great-grandmother's literary ambitions to her mother's literary success.

The first edition of *Three Generations of English Women* was immediately well received and Ross's editing praised even when 'the really biographical part' was thought to be 'somewhat slight' ('The Letters of Learned Ladies and Famous Men' 3). Oscar Wilde ends his review for the *Woman's World*, 'Some Literary Ladies' (1889), by returning to his admiration for Ross's editorial skills: 'Mrs Ross has certainly produced a most fascinating volume, and her book is one of the season. It is edited with tact and judgement' (143). The reviewer of the *Pall Mall Gazette* announces her work is 'something more than an ordinary memoir of mother, daughter, and granddaughter' (3). Ross's scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings show how carefully she collected reviews of her work and suggest the positive reception her work received strengthened her confidence in uncovering its potential as a 'stimulus to women' ('The Letters of Learned Ladies and Famous Men' 3).³ The second edition outlines her matrilineage as a rare example of a female intellectual legacy, sustained by three generations, with added material and conviction.

The *Pall Mall Gazette's* reviewer understands the historical significance and cultural appeal of Ross's biography:

It is a picture of Norwich as an intellectual centre, a contribution to the study of early Radical philosophy, a sketch of John Austin, a record of politics and personages, a glimpse of the Europe of our youth, and a singular and notable collection of the letters of distinguished men and women. The horizon widens from page to page.' (3)

This review suggests that the letters of the 'distinguished men', whose lives were interconnected to Ross's subjects, were an essential component in the biography. Their presence encouraged public recognition of her foremothers' contribution as catalysts of intellectual and familial networks that expanded in reach and increased in

significance, from the initial English provincial communities of Norwich and Norfolk to international European circles. The letters from ‘distinguished men’ secured interest and attracted a wider readership who might otherwise have disregarded *Three Generations of English Women* as a Victorian domestic memoir. Ross’s work was not ‘life writing by an older woman, a mother, for the purpose of conveying family memories, attitudes and achievements, her own as well as the family’s’ (Peterson 218). It was a matrilineal biography in which both men and women were represented as figures of historical interest and whose achievements were contextualised both within their family and wider intellectual communities.

In the above quotation, the *Pall Mall Gazette*’s reviewer also identifies how both time and space are essential tropes for Ross, who structures her writing so that it progresses chronologically from mother to daughter and geographically from local to international widening the horizon from Taylor’s salon in Norwich to Austin’s literary salons in London and Paris, and finally to Egypt and Duff Gordon’s house in Luxor. The ‘widening horizon’ captures effectively the expanding linguistic reach of Ross’s biography which begins in a wholly English speaking community, moves to cosmopolitan London and Paris, where Austin puts to good use those modern languages her mother wanted her to speak proficiently, and concludes with Arabic, a language Duff Gordon and Ross learnt residing in Egypt. The title *Three Generations of English Women* suggests a genealogical agenda but Ross’s pursuit is equally sociological. She contextualises her foremothers in the cultural and intellectual consciousness of their generations. For example, Taylor’s house ‘is the resort of many of the most cultivated men and women of her day’ (iii); and Austin’s Parisian salon is described by Cousin as ‘a centre where France, England, Germany, and Italy met, and learned to know and appreciate each other’ (vi). Ross represents them as promoters of

the intellectual scenes of their times. Her publisher, John Murray insisted on translating into English all the letters she included originally written in French, German and Italian. She criticised him but, on this matter, Murray was right: reviews recognised how the letters written and received by Taylor, Austin, and Duff Gordon were central to the success of this biography and its historical and literary significance. Through them, a wider readership accessed national and international philosophical and political debates, and the minds engaged in them.

The memoirs and correspondence announced in the title of *Three Generations of English Women* were rarely Ross's own. She chose the role of a biographer whose authority depended on a degree of detachment, as well as on being the descendant with direct access to her subjects' private lives and letters. Rather than drawing attention to herself, Ross made the two hundred and sixty-five letters written by Taylor, Austin, and Duff Gordon central to her project: it was vital that the account of her foremothers' lives should come to life through their own letter writing. In the introduction Ross announced that the letters of her foremothers 'will show' (v) and 'will tell' (ix). The significance and originality of her work was founded on these letters and the female intellectual heritage they documented. Following Ross's suggestion, I now focus on the intergenerational correspondence between mothers and daughters in order to investigate the ways in which her foremothers supported their daughters in widening their intellectual and professional horizons.

Thinking through Ross's matrilineal legacy

In examining the impact of private letters in Victorian biographies of nineteenth-century women writers, Joanne Shattock remarks that a 'letter was the equivalent of an overheard conversation, an intimate glimpse of the "real" woman' (12). The many

letters included in *Three Generations of English Women* have this impact: they resonate with the voices of Ross's great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. In her introduction to *Lives of the Early Medici*, Ross acknowledges a growing interest in 'the *vie intime* of personages who have become historical.' (*Lives of the Early Medici* v) In her opinion, the biographer convenes her subjects' intimate life through letter writing. After more than twenty years, she affirms the originality of this biographical project 'is founded on letters, for the most part private, of Medici men, women, and children, and their friends, written during those decades when the family was being moulded for the great European destiny which lay hidden in the future before it' (vi). The same is true of *Three Generations of English Women* which narrates the lives of her foremothers through their original, private letters and those of their children, relatives, and friends. They give direct access to their life writing for Ross frames their correspondence but does not comment on the content. Collected together, they voice intergenerational epistolary conversations through which mothers encourage their daughters to attain an independent intellectual life. In the correspondence between mothers and daughters, a maternal mentoring model can be traced. This is the model that encouraged writing careers of 'European reputation' (Wilde 130) that Ross inherited.

Ross announces a line of female intellectual legacy in the first chapter where she states that Taylor 'possessed the pen of a ready writer, and her literary faculty was inherited by her daughter, Mrs Austin, and her granddaughter, Lady Duff Gordon' (4). Rather than outlining similarities or differences, developments or transformations across generations, she is confident the selected letters collected together will facilitate such comparisons directly because they are evidence of the 'literary faculty' (4) her subjects inherited from her great-grandmother. Taylor's correspondence is

proof of a writing talent she did not develop into a profession and of her educational vision through which her talent was transmitted and developed successfully by Austin, Duff Gordon, and Ross. The difficulties of researching female ancestors are evident: only three chapters are dedicated to Taylor's life whilst Austin's is narrated in forty-one chapters, and her mother's in twelve. Both Ross's grandmother and mother had a highly regarded status as professional writers and, in her mother's case, the events of the final decade were already narrated in her epistolary travel writing. Ross herself uses extracts from *Letters from the Cape* and *Letter from Egypt*. Although the disparity is obvious, Ross makes the most of her great-grandmothers' chapters as she sets out her editorial strategies, which she then applies also to her other two subjects. Firstly, she uncovers her subjects' voices as young girls, then as wives and mothers, and ultimately as grandmothers. Here Ross sets out her matrilineal structure that collects the lives of her three subjects together but does not return on it so overtly at any other point. She focuses on editing their letters, above all those that develop successful mother-daughter dynamics and, in the case of Austin's and Duff Gordon's lives, she privileges those that engage with current intellectual and political debates favouring their professional achievements over domestic ones.

The letters of her subjects as young girls are of particular interest because they outline two important constant elements of their education: a household where adults have Dissenting intellectual interests, and access to an education that combines learning classical and modern European languages from an early age. From the start, the letters also highlight interactions with the ideas of their time through conversations at social and family gatherings. For instance, Taylor draws attention to the importance of education for 'a well-educated young woman may always provide

for herself' (39). In a letter celebrating the abolition of the slave trade dated 1807, she expands on the importance of studying stating:

'[t]he 'character of girls must depend upon their reading as much as upon the company they keep. Besides the intrinsic pleasure to be derived from solid knowledge, a woman ought to consider it as her best resource against poverty.' (34)

Austin is fourteen years old and her mother ensures she is aware of her intellectual opportunities and insists she should learn both through formal education and experiencing the current political, social and cultural affairs when she stays with her older brother in London. Taylor also reiterates, as she often does, her ultimate goal, intellectual proficiency on which her daughter will be able to base a financial independence. She is keen for Austin to remember that what appears to be 'a little study, and a little literary talk' (39) at a young age will be crucial to a profession.

In her letters, Taylor includes suggestions on what events to attend and, at times, tickets to concerts, lectures, and exhibitions. Travelling she thinks is an important means to learn and expose oneself to new ideas. When her daughter is a guest of relatives and friends, Taylor attempts to shape her behaviour as well as her studies suggesting 'to enjoy and take a share in the choice society with whom [she has] the happiness to converse.' (33) She is anxious that her daughter should mature preserving a kind and unselfish disposition and argues that, '[ev]en intellectual improvement, that great distinction of a rational being, stands second in the catalogue of what [she] wishes her dear child to be remarkable for – may general kindness be the first.' (35) 'Remarkable' is a word Ross so frequently chooses to define her foremothers that it turns into a motif. In this letter, Taylor highlights the two most important qualities each of the three generations inherits: intellectual engagement and kindness of heart. Each generation wishes the next to be remarkable as rational being capable of always acting morally.

Austin's letters hold the attention because they discuss developing philosophical and educational theories and demonstrate she is a highly respected friend of those philosophers and historians whose work she translates. Ross is keen on developing her grandmother's image as an educational reformer who mediated developments in countries such as France and Germany stating: '[t]he chief interest of her life was Popular Education' (99). She recounts how Austin contributed to establishing new village schools in Malta between 1836 and 1838, when her husband was royal commissioner there; sustained public primary education; and in 1857 published on girls' schools and the training of working women. Austin's career as an excellent translator, Ross knows, proves that Taylor was right, 'a well-educated [...] woman may always provide for herself' (39). Ross included Austin's correspondence with William Gladstone which revealed that he had listened with interest to her advocacy of national education from an early age as the basis of equal opportunities, and had sought her advice as an expert on different European Educational systems. This gave a public dimension to her letters, showing their potential for a wider social influence.⁴

Ross's editorial strategy is evident in her grandmother's biography where Austin's professional correspondence dominates and her domestic disappointments are not investigated. Whilst Austin destroyed her passionate correspondence with Hermann Pückler - Muskau (1785-1871), he kept it. The translation of Pückler - Muskau's *Tour in England, Ireland, and France in the Years 1828 and 1829*, a text that was notorious for its sexual content, launched her career in 1832; their correspondence came to light in 1980 and 'brought to the surface an emotional strain in her nature.' (Downing 21). In *Three Generations of English Women* a sentence in a letter Austin writes to Guizot after her husband's death in January 1860 also reveals

it: 'I will confess it to *you*. He [her husband] had not always been a very tender husband to me, nor easy to please' (360). Ross does not comment on this brief, confidential confession. As she progresses from one generation to another, she focuses on her foremothers' intellectual and literary contributions in the pursuit of a continuous legacy that brings them together. Differences of opinion between mothers and daughters regarding engagement and marriages at a young age are also mitigated by Ross who presents a mother's concerns about marrying at a young age for example, in the case of Duff Gordon and, in Ross's case, marrying a much older man at a very young age. Ross does not pursue romantic tropes but contextualises what may appear conflicts between mothers and their adolescent daughters through a maternal perspective. The letters she incorporates show a mother's anxiety in regard to her daughter attaining intellectual independence through education and experiential knowledge prior to marriage. Whilst in the first edition Taylor is 'an affectionate and anxious mother' (21), in the second edition, Ross highlights her persuasive mentoring skills and depicts her as an 'affectionate mother' (43). She appreciates her concerns.

Duff Gordon followed in her mother's footsteps both in terms of language skills and profession. However, her life's trajectory changed after her health deteriorated in 1861, and she decided to spend her final years in Egypt, where she discovered her potential as an interlocutor for those whose life stories were untold because they remained outside the conventions of Victorian culture. Her letters to her mother resonate of a childhood partly spent part in Germany: she addresses her mother as 'mutter' (447) and signs as 'Toddie' (448). This correspondence is haunted by Duff Gordon's illness. Although it focuses on their 'busy intellectual' (477) lives engaged with current national and international affairs, Austin's previous correspondence to Saint Hilaire and Guizot has already presented her concerns and

fears regarding her daughter's health condition. Consequently, the pathos of the third and final section of the biography increases. As Duff Gordon's death approaches, Ross reveals her attachment to her mother with three letters openly addressed to her and her reminiscences of 'a whole day' in Philae spent 'sitting under the portico of an old temple and gazing far away into Nubia, talking of him who sleeps in Philae, and whom old Herodotus would not name.' (556-57) Ross uses the first person sporadically: in these final pages she prefers a more personal tone and the plural form 'we' used in this passage to intensify the intimacy of this image of a mother and daughter reflecting upon death on the island thought to be the place of burial and resurrection of the Egyptian god of the underworld, Osiris, the island Duff Gordon identifies as 'the most beautiful object [her] eyes ever saw' in *Letters from Egypt* (63). With hindsight, she transforms it into a poignant farewell.

Ross rebalances the tone by depicting her mother as the "Sitt-el-Kebeer" (the great lady) [...], who, like the Sitt, was just, and had a heart that loved the Arabs.' (555) She summarises her mother's final years in Egypt with an image that sees her as a cultural mediator who listened to and told the stories of the community she lived in. She ascertains Duff Gordon's status as a remarkable storyteller who '*sits among the people* [...], and sees it all.' (Duff Gordon 228) This figure came to signify her mother's literary talent and importantly Ross adopts it in the introduction to her first book, *Italian Sketches*, published a year earlier in 1887, to present herself as the daughter of Duff Gordon who inherited her literary abilities as a storyteller. This perceptive storyteller aptly combines the two qualities Taylor hoped her female descendants would be remembered for: remarkable intellect and kindness. Ross ends with an image that unites her three foremothers by capturing their significance as cultural mediators. As their biographer, she too can be pictured as a storyteller sitting

among her foremothers' letters, 'think[ing] back through' (Woolf 69) their intellectual lives, and passing them down together through life writing.

In *Three Generations of English Women* Ross succeeds in reclaiming the lives of her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother as remarkable intellectual women and affectionate mothers whose legacy she can 'think back through' (Woolf 69). In so doing, she anticipates the historical research on women's lives Woolf invites women to undertake in *A Room of One's Own*. Above all, through writing their lives together she puts her foremothers forward as stimulating examples of female intellectual endeavour. When Woolf visited Ross at Poggio Gherardo in 1909, she thought Ross 'certainly look[ed] remarkable'. (Downing 227) Woolf, who read *Three Generations of English Women* at the age of fourteen, seems to recall her reading experience by remembering this favourite adjective of Ross. In her journal, Woolf also reflects on Ross's 'pride which comes to those who have lived among the chosen spirits of the time. A word of family, [she then adds] & her wits were at work at once.' (*Passionate Apprentice* 398) Woolf recognises that the most important role Ross plays is as a story-teller and mediator providing a bridge between past and the future generations of women writers.

Three Generations of English Women reclaims the intellectual contributions of Susannah Taylor, Sarah Austin, and Lucie Duff Gordon and outlines a matrilineage that affirms empowering possibilities for female agency. In their activities as professional writers, translators, and promoters of international intellectual salons, her foremothers are presented as role models for younger generations of women. *Three Generations of English Women* is a Victorian biography that has 'the ability [...] to teach by example' (Atkinson 24) through the lives of women who challenged

nineteenth-century social and cultural constraints. Its title reinforces the nature of her project as a contribution to the retelling of British national history through women's lives. Ross's seemingly conventional contribution to Victorian life writing develops a line of female intellectual legacy originating in Susannah Taylor's educational vision and inherited by Austin, Duff Gordon, and Ross. It is Taylor's mentoring model that is transmitted from generation to generation and through which Ross's biography gains the ability to inspire by example across multiple generations. Ross's life writing also shows that matrilineal legacy proves to be significant in understanding the development of nineteenth-century women's intellectual lives.

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¹ See Ben Downing's *Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet* (2014) and Sarah Benjamin's *A Castle in Tuscany: The Remarkable Life of Janet Ross* (2006).

² Austin also edited her husband's scholarly work on jurisprudence, John Austin's *The Province of Jurisprudence determined. (An Outline of a course of lectures of general jurisprudence or the philosophy of positive law)*, published by John Murray, 1861-63; and the first edition of her daughter's *Letters from Egypt, 1862-1869* (1865).

³ Ross's scrapbooks are kept in the Waterfield Collection, at the Harold Acton Library, The British Institute of Florence, Firenze, Italy.

⁴ The first letter of this correspondence included in the biography is dated 1839 and the last 1864. During their correspondence Gladstone was a member of the Peel's cabinet and Chancellor of the Exchequer.