***'A Circle of Sisters': Eminent Victorians***

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**By Amanda Foreman**

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A CIRCLE OF SISTERS Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne-Jones, Agnes Poynter and Louisa Baldwin. By Judith Flanders. Illustrated. 392 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. $27.95.

GEORGIANA, Agnes, Alice and Louisa Macdonald were four Victorian sisters from the wrong side of the class divide. Their father was a Methodist minister, their mother the daughter of a wholesale grocer. Primarily home-educated like most girls of their station, they were bright rather than intellectual, pretty rather than beautiful, domestic rather than ambitious. Nothing in their early lives suggested that they would become the 19th-century equivalent of the Langhorne sisters.

Georgiana married the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones, and Agnes the arts administrator Sir Edward Poynter. Alice gave birth to Rudyard Kipling and Louisa to the future prime minister Stanley Baldwin. And yet, as Judith Flanders reveals in her engaging family history, "A Circle of Sisters," proximity to greatness ensured them neither happiness nor fulfillment.

Unsurprisingly, the designated star of the Macdonald family was the eldest son, Harry, whose parents scrimped and sacrificed in order to send him to the best private school in Birmingham. He was the acknowledged genius, the receptacle of all their pride and hope. Even his younger brother, Fred, received a third-tier education so Harry might have new books and clothes. However, all this pressure and worship did more harm than good, leaving Harry with a crippling sense of entitlement and a shirker's attitude to work. After failing to take his degree at Oxford, he sailed to New York in 1858, penniless and prospectless, and disappeared from the family annals as if his existence had been a bad dream.

But Harry did leave one important legacy to his sisters. Among his school friends was Ned Jones, a poor boy with outsize artistic ambitions. Even after Ned went to Oxford and dropped Harry in preference for the more cultured William Morris, he still regularly visited the Macdonalds for tea. Harry's sister Georgiana was not yet 16 when Ned proposed. They were married four years later, in 1860.

Ned changed his last name to the grander-sounding Burne-Jones, but he and his wife were desperately poor for the first few years. Flanders is particularly adept at describing the back-breaking work Georgiana undertook as she tackled what the Victorians euphemistically described as domestic chores. Sheets had to be washed, clothes cleaned, fire grates emptied, vermin eradicated, everyday soot and dust removed. The family's lodgings had only a limited supply of cold water and no kitchen. Somehow, though, Georgiana managed to create an inviting home where Ruskin, Rossetti, Morris and Swinburne were regular visitors.

What crushed her was not the thanklessness of domestic life -- or Burne-Jones's cheerful dismissal of her own artistic talents -- but her exclusion from company once her first child was born. "I remember the feeling of exile with which I now heard through its closed doors the well-known voices of friends together with Edward's familiar laugh," Georgiana wrote, "while I sat with my little son on my knee and dropped selfish tears upon him as the 'separator of companions and the terminator of delights.' "

Although the sale of Burne-Jones's paintings and his partnership with William Morris improved Georgiana's standard of living, her marital happiness seems to have been brief. After her husband's death, she claimed that the three best years of her life were 1856 to 59, during their engagement. For Burne-Jones, the golden years were those of his affair with the Greek sculptor Mary Zambaco, which nearly ended in a suicide pact. He later compounded the betrayal by exhibiting a painting entitled "Phyllis and Demophoön," which depicted Mary as the nymph Phyllis.

Georgiana consoled herself with her children and her friends (among whom were George Eliot and Rosalind Howard, Countess of Carlisle). William Morris loved her to his dying breath, although there is no evidence that their deep relationship was anything more than platonic. Certainly they were a great deal better suited to each other than to their spouses. Like Morris, Georgiana remained a life-long socialist. Though Burne-Jones slowly fossilized into the bedrock of the establishment, accepting a baronetcy for the sake of his son (or so he claimed), his wife continued to be true to her radical ideals. Even in old age, she defied convention by supporting the Boers against the British, and later rejoiced at the Russian Revolution.

Georgiana's older sister, Alice, the mother of Rudyard Kipling, was a much more steely character. She had also married an artist, but, unlike Ned Burne-Jones, John Lockwood Kipling was a quiet, earnest man whose passion lay in teaching and art history. When he accepted a schoolmaster's post in Bombay, Alice was forced to part from her friends and family; her unhappiness in India was exacerbated by a nearly six-year separation from their small son and daughter.

Conventional wisdom decreed that children thrived best in an English climate, so the Kiplings sent Rudyard and Trix, aged 5 and 3, to live with a family in Southsea. Rudyard's devastating short story "Baa Baa, Black Sheep," about a little boy who suffers great cruelty and neglect at the hands of his English guardians, told the world what he thought of his parents' act. But Flanders shows that Alice suffered too. She missed her children terribly and no doubt would have removed them if she had known the full extent of Rudyard's misery.

Although Alice tried to reconstitute the "family square" when parents and children were finally reunited, the wounds never truly healed. After Rudyard married Caroline Balestier, she expended a great deal of energy keeping him away from his father and mother. Alice Kipling fared little better with her daughter, the mercurial Trix, who suffered recurring bouts of insanity after her marriage.

Following a long and unheralded stint as principal of the Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy School of Art and Industry in Bombay, John Kipling finally achieved recognition when the Duke of Connaught, Queen Victoria's third son, commissioned him to design an Indian-themed billiard room. Until then, Alice had endured the ignominy of being the poor relation of her more successful sisters. But 20 years of scraping around the fringes of Anglo-Indian society left their mark. By middle age, she had become a hard-edged and critical woman.

Agnes and Louisa Macdonald did not leave behind as many documentary traces as their sisters. Nothing of Agnes's writings remains, and Louisa's letters are in an archive Flanders was refused permission to consult. She maneuvers around these large holes in her narrative by turning her book into a family saga, with grandparents, children, cousins and friends all trotted out to fill the void. For the last hundred pages, all four sisters recede into the background.

"A Circle of Sisters" was first published in England in 2001. During the intervening years, Flanders wrote a superb second book, the highly acclaimed "Inside the Victorian Home," which came out in the United States last year. The reversal of order is not to her advantage. "A Circle of Sisters" is a slight, charming book, best regarded as a chef's amuse-bouche before the main meal.

Amanda Foreman, the author of "Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire," is at work on a new book, "Our American Cousins: How Britain Fought in the Civil War."