The field of Scottish early modern women's literature and history is a rapidly burgeoning one, but it is still hampered by a relative lack of good modern editions of primary sources. David Mullan has set himself the task of providing such sources, beginning with the autobiography of Mistress Rutherford (1630s) which will shortly appear in the *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society*, volume 13. His new book, *Women's Life Writing*, continues this work, providing the reader with the unabridged autobiographical writings of eight early modern women - Katherine Collace (c.1635–97) and her sister, Jean Collace, Lilias Dunbar (born c.1658), Helen Alexander (c.1653-1729), Henrietta Lindsay (c.1657-c.1721), Agnes Paton (fl. 1691-7), Katherine Hamilton (1662-1707), and Elizabeth Blackadder (c.1660-1732). The women come from varied backgrounds. Henrietta Lindsay, Lady Campbell, and Katherine Hamilton, duchess of Atholl, belonged to the aristocracy; Lilias Dunbar came from a lairdly family; Agnes Paton, Elizabeth Blackadder, and Katherine and Jean Collace were the daughters of ministers; and Helen Alexander married a merchant (who composed his own memoir).

Women are surprisingly well-represented among the autobiographical writings identified by Mullan for this period. Of the twenty-nine pieces composed by lay people, sixteen were written by women (although one which was known in the 1880s has not yet been recovered). All of the women whose writings are
presented here were Presbyterian and most were caught up in the religious and political troubles of the Covenanting period, a number of them suffering imprisonment or personal loss. A concise introduction sets out the political and religious history of the time for those readers less familiar with seventeenth-century Scottish history and also introduces some of the historical figures who loom large in the texts. There is a brief discussion of the conditions of female writing, considering both the women presented here and some of the other women writers of the period. This section is also useful in providing a guide for readers who might wish to read the works which are not included in this book. The motives which inspired women to take pen to paper are examined, including the practice of writing out personal covenants and the introspection encouraged by Presbyterian piety.

Each work is introduced by a brief description of the writer’s life. On the whole, however, the editor prefers the women to speak for themselves. The works are heavily annotated, with editorial explanations of biblical and contemporary references, events, and people which might not be familiar to modern readers identified – the scholarship here is very impressive, and readers owe a debt to Dr. Mullan for his assiduous work in identifying such references. Some commentary on individual passages is offered - for example Katherine Collace’s discussion of her sickness is put in the context of the breaking down of her marriage, and questions are raised about her failure to discuss her marital difficulties openly. A comment on Lilias Dunbar raising the question of whether or not she was bipolar seems slightly surprising, but thought-provoking. There are also some useful comparisons with the writings of contemporary women, such as Mistress Rutherford.

One of the most interesting aspects of these works is the insight some of them offer into contemporary married and family life, revealing rarely-seen emotions. A few might strike modern readers as unusual; for example Helen Alexander’s comment on her second marriage: “I thought my end in marrying was that we might have religious discourse when we were awake in our beds.” (p.200) Others speak to women’s experience across the ages – Henrietta Lindsay on her pregnancy: “it became matter of terror lest excessive grieving might occasion the infant yet unborn to be fool” (p.226); Katherine Hamilton writing a week after the death
of her infant daughter, who “was a very hopeful lovely child, on whom I confess I set my heart too much” (p.362), and trying to reconcile herself to God’s will; Elizabeth Blackadder on her husband’s trip to London: “My parting with him was an extreme grief to me” (p.391). Although there is always the issue of the extent to which these educated women writers were representative of contemporary women, the writings presented here do speak to common female experiences and give a rare glimpse into the female perspective on life in early modern Scotland.

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