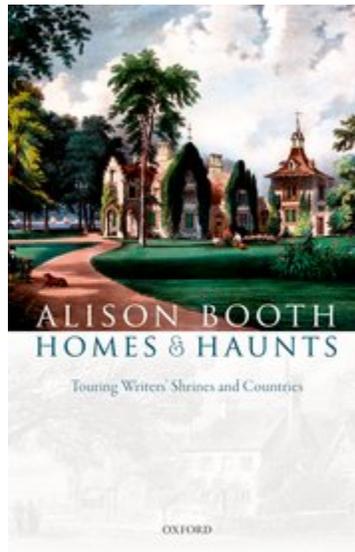


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Age and Gender: Aging in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by Alice Crossley



Ghost Walks

[*Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries*](#). Alison Booth. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 333 pp.

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<1>As Alison Booth explains, homes and haunts is a subgenre of biography that centers on pilgrimages to author homes and surrounding environments, or “Brontë Country,” as one salient example. Booth’s previous book, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago, 2004) examines a different biographical form, the prosopography, “a distinctive research method to recover the lives of groups of people” (63). It seems feasible that the current book gathers together materials that didn’t find a place in the earlier study. Gender is less a keynote than a meandering thread in Booth’s exploration of the homes of writers that span both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the Atlantic Ocean, although the focus is on British writers.

<2>Booth’s meticulously researched book spotlights the homes and haunts genre, also related to what she calls topobiography, that focus on writers in their own domestic and surrounding

environments. Not only does *Homes and Haunts* investigate books about literary pilgrimages in the last two centuries, but Booth herself recounts her own visits to every significant home in her study along with information gleaned from curators and tenants. As she puts it, “It really does make a difference to go there, to sense the layout, to make some order out of the anachronistic contiguity” (247). Providing readers with the different kind of “order” other visitors have made, Booth takes layered journeys through published accounts and her own literary itinerary. The list of writers whose homes figure in this study is lengthy although some of these are brief stops, sometimes only for a sidetrip, rather than full-fledged excursions. American writers figure in part because of their own literary tourism in Britain or because prominent British writers visited their US homes.

<3> The first chapter, “Tours, Texts, Houses, and Things,” scopes out the large terrain of literary tourism by asking, “When did audiences begin to seek the ghosts of writers in homes and surroundings? When did it become common to take a pilgrimage to, or place a commemorative marker on, a literary rather than a sacred site?” (19). Booth begins by considering how professors of English literature have addressed these questions, especially those who share her own “renewed interest in material contexts of literary production” (26). Here Booth admits that wherever she travels, she locates stops on local literary trails and that she “get[s] some sort of charge out of touching relics: a book signed by Mary Russell Mitford, a portable desk from Charles Dickens’s travels in North America, Thomas Carlyle’s study chair” (27). This “charge” may seem some kind of channeling the spirit of the deceased writer, but although there are many such occasions throughout *Homes and Haunts* that Booth remarks on, this experience remains in the realm of a ghostly affect. Do some writers’ objects carry more “charge” than others? Do some kinds of objects have a haunting quality where some pattern is discernible? Are these objects ones recalling some powerful scene in a novel or the literary legends around the author, like the sofa (now only a replica) where Emily Brontë died in the Haworth Parsonage dining room where she and her sisters wrote? And if these objects resemble religious relics, what kind of belief system do they encourage?

<4>As Booth notes, in the early nineteenth century “house museums double as memorials and research centers—chapels of ease for new Dissenting secular religions” (31). After exploring a range of motives prompting such pilgrimages, this framing chapter turns to the ways nineteenth-century print culture developed the homes and haunts genre from gift books and periodicals about the writer’s home at midcentury to compendiums like Elbert Hubbard’s *Little Journeys to the Homes of Famous Women* (1897), part of a series of books to guide American literary tourists. Booth also focuses on how Jane Austen scholars and ardent readers have nourished tourism to Chawton (both the house museum and the Chawton House Library for scholars in residence), and that more generally, claims Booth, “Love of Austen is stirred by love of the English country home” (39) fortified within her own novels with dramatic properties like Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or the eponymous Northanger Abbey. The study brings together a variety of materials in literary tourism from fiction and literary tour guides to the blue plaques of London and to the house museums themselves along with their relics of writers’ lives and the gardens surrounding the houses. Dating back to 1863 with a committee that included Harriet Martineau, blue plaques now number over 880, although some note that the historic house no longer exists, such as the plaque in South Street London that announces “in a house on this site Florence Nightingale 1820-1910 lived and died” (48). The cast of writers with plaques

continues to expand so that Mary Seacole, barred by Nightingale because of her race from joining the nursing unit serving in Crimea, now has her own plaque.

<5>The second chapter examines nonfiction homes and haunts books published in the nineteenth century. Booth remarks that the narrative voice of the genre, with an emphasis on “we” and “you,” resembles the communal quality feminist narratologists have identified with novels by women. And yet Booth retreats from casting the entire genre in a feminine voice due to “ideological inflection,” given that “tourism can be viewed as either democratizing or colonizing” (61). The chapter explores literary pilgrimage through two married couples who published in this genre: Mary and William Howitt; Anna and Samuel Hall. Anna Hall wrote about contemporary women writers and their homes including Maria Edgeworth and Grace Aguilar, and more broadly, Booth comments, “Hall’s prosopography seems to underline the special meaning of homes and haunts for women writers, whose careers fatefully turn upon their home life” (92).

<6>Booth addresses how reception of women writers blurs setting in the published texts with “the inferred personality of the author and the regional temperament of the actual locations” (103) in the third chapter, “Ladies with Pets and Flowers; with Graveyards and Windswept Moors.” Here Booth investigates “the more gossipy dimensions of reception” like pets, flowers, and domestic management to bring out “the nuances of literary personae for women writers at home” (103). Mary Russell Mitford’s *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (1824) established the prominence of place through gendered hospitality, a quality that infuses Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853). In both sets of stories, unmarried women narrators invite readers into their village life. Booth notes that Mitford’s Three Mile Cross, which was a literary shrine into the early twentieth century, has all but forgotten Mitford’s mark on the place. This demotion Booth chalks up to how “the new literary history” treated Mitford as merely “a specialist in nostalgia” (130) along with the declining appeal of what *Our Village* offered: hospitality in the small English village and retirement from the anxieties of the rapidly expanding cityscape.

<7>Mitford’s *Our Village* inspired Gaskell’s *Cranford*, while Gaskell’s topobiographical *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), as well as the settings within the sisters’s novels, creates the Haworth homes and haunts industry. Booth notes that Gaskell herself “has inspired less pilgrimage or tourism than other Victorian writers of comparable status today” (136), perhaps because Gaskell’s daughters thwarted biographies of their mother. What about George Eliot, who is barely mentioned in this book? Interestingly, Brontë places, whether within fiction or the Yorkshire moors surrounding Haworth, feature inhospitable environments in contrast to the hospitality flourishing in *Our Village* and *Cranford*. Maybe this uninviting atmosphere is conducive to ghost walking. At Haworth, Booth describes the sight of the sofa in the parlor: “And then I could not see or breathe or speak: sudden grief for a young dying body that had been there” (157); visiting the physical place prompts her “to imagine a tall, taut, wasted young woman fighting her way toward death in that little parlor” (157). Booth also relays such experiences from others, most notably Rumer Godden’s claim to have met the ghosts of Flora and Miles from *The Turn of the Screw* while staying at Henry James’s Lamb House. Booth’s collected anecdotes do suggest that women tourists admit to more susceptibility to author spirits.

<8>Chapter Four explores authors who take up residence in or near other writers' homes, such as Martineau's house near Wordsworth's Dove Cottage in the Lake District, the Longfellow House in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Concord homes of Alcott, Emerson, and Hawthorne, and Lamb House where James lived in Sussex. Leaving the countryside, the rest of the book tends toward the places affiliated with London writers Carlyle, Woolf, and Dickens. The fifth chapter focuses on the Cheyne Row house and other writers who lived nearby in the Chelsea neighborhood of London, along with the sometimes tumultuous marriage of Thomas and Jane Carlyle, along with Virginia Woolf's writings on the house and the marriage. Booth also folds in visits to Woolf's own homes in London and in Sussex, as well as how Woolf's fictional settings echo these locales, such as Katherine Hilbery's Cheyne Walk home in *Night and Day*. The final chapter, "Haunting Dickens World," considers how shifts in literary reception "might help us define a role for the citizen scholar or students of all kinds in collecting accessible sources of literary and biographical history" (255) by way of the homes and haunts genre about Dickens over the last century, and tours of the Dickens Museum in London, Dickens Country in Kent, and the Dickens Festival in Rochester.

<9>That Booth concludes with an iconic Victorian male author suggests that the woman writer is not a primary topic, but nevertheless remains a solid current of interest throughout the book. After examining "a homosocial succession of Americans initiated into English literature through pilgrimage," Booth observes that these "international encounters often bring forward a female mentor, the custodian who initiates the hero, or the sacrificial heroine as a detour on the quest" (204). Yet Booth too is ambivalent about the value of the difference these homes and haunts offer. As she attests, after visiting the stand-alone studio at Monk's House, "My Woolf is in her books, not this detached study on display" (254).