

by Kate Davies

*From the quiet restraint of the Regency buildings that line Edinburgh's George Street, you would never guess that a century and a half ago, this was the scene of a knitting revolution. Here the ladies of the city gathered to exchange "receipts," compare their successes with the latest stitch patterns, admire vibrant new shades of yarn, and purchase pins, embellishments, and notions. Fashionable and wealthy knitters beat a path to a shop at the street's West end, where their every knitterly want might be supplied. At number 63, they found Mrs. Jane Gaugain, author, designer and knitting entrepreneur, whose shop was the epicentre of the Victorian knitting revolution.*

Jane Alison was born a tailor's daughter at the turn of the nineteenth century. She married a merchant with property on the edge of Edinburgh's Old Town who capitalized on the relaxation of trade after the Napoleonic wars by importing "Berlin wool, French blond lace," and "materials for ladies fancy work" to Scotland from the continent. Jane transformed her husband's shop into a thriving haberdashery. Business boomed, and by the mid 1830s, the couple was able to move to elegant commercial premises on Frederick Street, and later to George Street, at the heart of Edinburgh's New Town.



Jane was not merely a vendor of goods to the city's fashionable elite. She was a woman of shrewd business sense and literary ambition. During the decades of the mid-nineteenth century, the culture of knitting underwent a profound change, and Jane Gaugain turned this transformation to profitable advantage. While poorly paid rural workers in the English North and Scottish Borders still turned out stockings for necessity, a new generation of wealthy urban needlewomen had

begun to emerge for whom knitting was about luxury and leisure rather than utility or labour. "They have borrowed this fashionable employment," remarked one Victorian magazine, "from the ladies of Germany," and indeed, the new Saxe-Coburg monarchy's fondness for Berlin wool meant that continental knitting was very much a la mode. Edinburgh's well-to-do knitters were less interested in warm durable stockings than they were in lacy tippets and elegant muffatees, so when they came to buy a few ounces of soft, fingering-weight Shetland or Merino from the stylish shop at 63 George Street, they also needed pattern instructions for the delicate shawl for which the yarn was intended. Jane Gaugain was there to provide all of this for them.

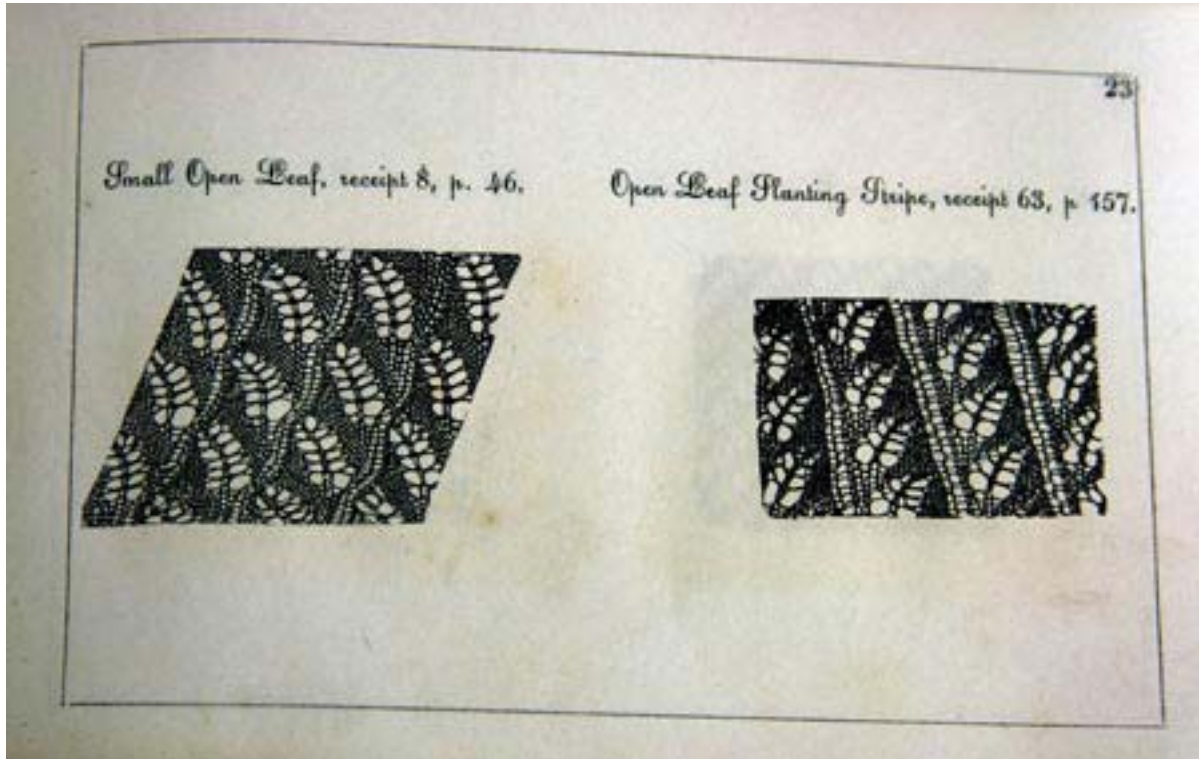


Jane had been writing and circulating patterns on request throughout the 1830s and in 1840, published the first volume of her *Lady's Assistant in Knitting, Netting, and Crochet* to immediate acclaim. The book was conveniently pocket-sized and the patterns were written using her own unique system of pattern notation—the first to be devised and widely used in Anglo-American knitting. "My method of explaining the receipts, though novel, has been found to answer the purpose completely," Gaugain wrote, "giving a simple and clear explanation by means of letters and figures, which are easily reduced to practice." Her *Lady's Assistant* included patterns for shawls, caps, purses, counterpanes, and a wide range of coloured and open-work designs. The style was crisp, easy to follow, and proved wildly popular. In its first year of publication, the book's list of eminent subscribers and patrons swelled to several hundred, and was headed by the dowager Queen Adelaide. "It affords me much pleasure," Gaugain wrote with no small degree of pride in the preface to her fourth edition, "that the reception [the book] has met with has exceeded my most sanguine expectations."



But not everyone in Edinburgh was excited by the fashionable knitting revolution. The same year that Jane Gaugain's *Lady's Assistant* was published, Tait's *Edinburgh Magazine* declared itself entirely scornful of new books that were:

*written solely to instruct ladies in the pretty make believe industry, or elaborate idleness, of knitting all sorts of things in all sorts of crinkum-crankum ways. . . We deny any woman engaged in these knitting processes which must require constant counting of stitches and un-distracted attention, to enjoy her own quiet thoughts. The honeycomb stitch, the ladder stitch, the diamond knitting, the porcupine boa, and the double eyelet knitting are surely enough to drive any woman mad.*

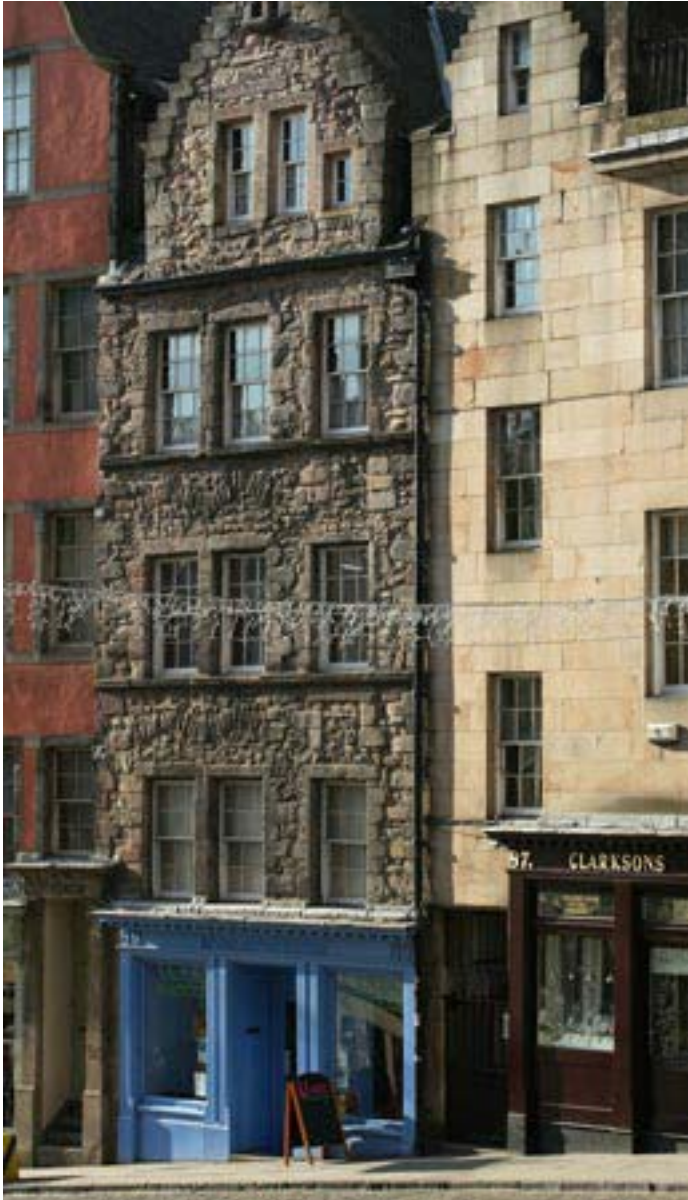


But despite Tait's predictable Victorian suspicion of the effects of complicated knitting on women's minds, the "madness" for Gaugain's patterns appeared to be endemic. Throughout the 1840s and 50s, she published numerous additional volumes, updated her shawls to accommodate the "Maltese" and "Swiss" patterns then in vogue, and produced several beautifully illustrated appendices to her *Lady's Assistant*. By request, she began to include charted paper and instructions for enterprising knitters to work out their own designs and added a mail-order service to her Edinburgh shop to meet demand. "The materials requisite for the various receipts in Mrs G's works can be forwarded by post to any part of the Kingdom," one advertisement announced. In Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford* (1851-53), the village ladies (all keen knitters) take advantage of such offers, and are encouraged to buy Shetland wool by post from Edinburgh. *Cranford's* Miss Matty and Miss Pole might well have been buying Gaugain's yarn, and they would almost certainly have seen her *Lady's Assistant*. It was the best-selling knitting book of the era, reaching a huge audience on both sides of the Atlantic, finally running to an impressive twenty-two editions.

Despite the immense popularity of Jane's books, her life was not particularly rosy. Her marriage was evidently unhappy, and by 1851 she and her husband lived apart. Only one of her six children (a daughter) survived to adulthood and Jane suffered for many years from tuberculosis, from which she finally died in 1860. Coloured by deep private suffering and sad deaths, her story perhaps seems a familiar nineteenth-century one. But far less familiar is the tale of a girl from humble beginnings who built a successful business in Scotland's first city, who popularised knitting for Edinburgh's fashionable classes, and whose innovative method of pattern writing secured her an international renown. Her books remain important documents of Scottish textile history, and continue to inspire contemporary designs—from intricate lace shawls to fabulous knitted pineapples. She is buried in Edinburgh's Dean Cemetery near the picturesque waters of Leith, whose steady flow once turned the wheels of the woollen mills that stood beside the river.



Gaugain's city remains a thriving centre of fashionable knitting today and Edinburgh is home to several successful young designers including Rachel Henderson, Jeanette Trotman, and Ysolda Teague. For Ysolda, Scotland's knitting heritage is a vital source of inspiration. "But the future of Scottish wool is just as important," she says. "It's crucial for designers to support independent producers, and to encourage knitters to care about the source of their materials, as well as the meaning and history of what they are doing when they knit." Ysolda's designs combine a respect for traditional Scottish techniques, with a very contemporary sense of process and connectedness, from the production of the yarn right through to the creation of the finished garment. In such thoughtful approaches to Scottish design and entrepreneurship, the spirit of Jane Gaugain survives.



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**Contributor Notes:**

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