



# Scotch Verdict: Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon

*Lillian Faderman*

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## **Scotch Verdict: Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon** Lillian Faderman

The year: 1810. The place: Edinburgh, Scotland. A student, Jane Cumming, accuses her school mistresses, Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods, of having an affair in the presence of their students. Dame Cumming Gordon, the wealthy and powerful grandmother of the accusing student, advises her friends to remove their daughters from the boarding school. Within days, the school is deserted and the two women deprived of their livelihood. Lillian Faderman, award-winning author of *Odd Girls* and *Twilight Lovers*, gives an extraordinary rendering of the real-life story on which Lillian Hellman based her famous play, *The Children's Hour*. Faderman reconstructs the libel suit filed by Pirie and Woods that eventually resulted in a scotch verdict - a verdict of not proven or an inconclusive decision. Through court transcripts, judges' notes, and her personal reflections on the witnesses' contradictory testimony and the prejudices of the men presiding over the case, Faderman skillfully documents the social, economic, and sexual pressures that shaped the lives of nineteenth-century women. Provocative and compelling, not only does *Scotch Verdict* point to the marginalization of women by raising issues of class, gender, and sexuality with respect to Pirie and Woods, but also of race in its depiction of Jane Cumming, the half-Indian child who was born in India and out of wedlock to Dame Cumming Gordon's eldest son.

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