

The Prospect Before Her: a History of Women in Western Europe Volume One 1500 - 1800

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The title was inspired by the birth, during the writing of this volume, of a child named after the author. A second volume will bring the survey to the present and to some glimpses of that young woman's prospects. The prospect presented here is that of the sleepy young knitter of the 18th century pictured on the cover and of generations before her.

One of the stranger characteristics of the historical profession is the still widespread conviction that the synthetic survey is an inferior form of output to the monograph. Constructing a narrative and an analysis from a body of primary sources is entrancing, but not difficult for a trained historian. Constructing a narrative and an interpretation out of a large, conflicting, uneven body of monographs - striving to deal justly with all one reads, always conscious that something important may be overlooked and of the need, not always evident to writers of monographs, to be accessible to inexpert readers, yet also helpful and interesting to the expert - is very difficult. Monographs provide the basic building blocks of history, but someone has to relate them to the large historical questions - design and build the building. Syntheses, like monographs, can be sloppily executed; when, like this one, they are superbly done, they are wholly invaluable.

Olwen Hufton starts by describing the massive expansion of women's history since the late 1960s. Not long before, Keith Thomas, characteristically, had been rash enough to offer a series of lectures on 17th-century women to Oxford undergraduates. Equally characteristically, 'His colleagues found the subject bizarre and the students simply did not turn up'. Hufton approves of this expansion but not of all its features. Especially in the early modern period women's history has been dominated by cultural history, influenced to varying degrees by Foucault, anthropologists such as Geertz or sociologists such as Elias, concerned with 'mentalites', beliefs, attitudes, representations of gender roles, often on a micro-level. This, as in the work of Natalie Zemon Davis, can be exciting and illuminating, but a strong theme of Hufton's book is that it leaves a lot out:

First, it has proved difficult to transfer this approach to a broader canvas without straying into the realm of conjecture; for many social historians the attempt has carried the risk of over-

speculation, the erection of the theoretical or 'generic' woman and man, versions of womanhood and manhood, at the expense of what was, as far as one can discern, the experience of real people. Secondly, in some cases the search for gender attitudes, and the belief that individuals were made not born, have tended to discount biological differences between women and men and to insist on gender as a cultural construct alone. The English and American women's movements have since the beginning of the century seen biological arguments as a way of denying women equality of opportunity. In the twentieth century these arguments have much to recommend them, but they remain problematic. In the early modern period, biology has to count for something. No one, for example, could plough a five-inch furrow in a condition of advanced or even early pregnancy. Thirdly, in attempting to understand the significance of rituals and cultural rules, insufficient attention has been given to the material condition of the lives of the vast majority of people.

This is to throw down the gauntlet to currently influential approaches: to accept such categories as 'experience' and 'real people' and the capacity of the historian to discern them in the past. It is to assert, without redundant polemic, that historians engage less naively with their sources than is sometimes thought, and that the role of the historian in seeking to reconstruct a sense of the past from a range of sources is different from that of the literary scholar engaging with a text, and not to be judged by the same 'theoretical' rules.

Throughout, the volume engages refreshingly, with big issues and Big Historians and other scholars who have generalised about history. She is never nasty, but she has an impressive line in sharp asides reserved for what she perceives as sloppy scholarship e.g. 'At the very bottom of the social scale in Britain there existed a practice ... about which claims have been made on very sparse evidence - that of wife sale'.

One big issue is that of continuity or change. She comments that most writing on women's history in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since the 1960s has focused on change, and for the worse: 'It is a saga of discontinuity or of descent from a paradise'. It is a paradise of gender equality which medievalists have failed to detect. Hufton comments that it is an illusion driven by awareness of women's predicament in the twentieth century. But the reality of continuing inequality in the present need in no way imply that things were once better. They may indeed, as the book implies, have been even worse, or, very often, bad in different ways. To an historian of the twentieth century, such as myself, one of the great virtues of this book is that it dispels many of the myths about the pre-industrial past which linger in the writings of those who come to modern women's history with no knowledge of a longer past. It should be compulsory reading for all who write on modern women's history.

Hufton is dealing with Braudel's period, from the 16th to the 18th centuries, valuing his work but critical of his picture of an 'almost motionless Europe', in which rural life is immobile, peasant experience and mentality missing from his account, whilst activity is concentrated in urban islands mobilised by trade. As she insists most people in Europe throughout her period were peasants and their lives were not static.

Running through the volume is a parallel vein of criticism of another influential interpretation, that of Norbert Elias. She is sceptical that the origins of the "civilising process" can be traced to the court at Versailles or that it flowed so smoothly as he suggests, especially into the lives of women e.g. those of all classes abused by drunken husbands in the nineteenth, or the twentieth century. One of the strengths of the book is the use of women's history to engage with influential interpretations, demonstrating that it does change how we see the past.

A more important theme is Hufton's concern (in my view wholly justified) that historians have too often confused the content of prescriptive writing with representation of reality. As others, such as Linda Colley, have pointed out, it may be the opposite: prescription may be at its most insistent when it supposed norms are being challenged. This is so of much writing about 'separate spheres' in the 19th century, and about the importance of the stable family in the late 19th. This is not, of course, to say that such writing has no value,

but that it must be read with care and tested against other sources, as Hufton does throughout. The book 'is about the interaction between beliefs about what was appropriate to men and women and what occurred in the practices of everyday life'.

She is concerned with western Europe over the three centuries. Most material is drawn from Britain and France. They after all contained one-third of all women in the region throughout this period; and more has been written about them than about women in other countries, especially those of eastern Europe. Unavoidably the book is shaped by what remains an uneven historiography. Other countries are woven into the story whenever possible. Germany figures most strongly in discussion of witchcraft (reasonably enough, almost a third of all known witch prosecutions occurred there) and deviant aspects of marriage. The Netherlands features most in its seventeenth century golden age. Hufton argues that her geographical span is justified because there was much in common, as well as much variety, in the experiences of women within it, so far as they are known. Without disputing this, I wish she had discussed further the implications of the differences which emerge throughout the book between north-western Europe and the Mediterranean south. In the latter codes of honour kept women's lives more constrained within the home, family structures were larger and more dominant. How much did this matter? The historiography of women is not only geographically uneven. Witches and nuns have always excited historians more than 'spinsters' and Hufton cannot go beyond the work she and other historians have done. The result is excellent chapters on the relationships of women with the devil and with god. But difficult as it is to find work on unmarried women, there is surely enough to justify more than four pages and other occasional references devoted to this numerous group? Even cross-dressers merit two and a half and, intriguing though they are, they weren't so numerous.

But what Hufton does write about is more important than what she doesn't. From the start we can never forget the material reality, especially of the poor, of the worlds she describes: where ease was described as having enough bread for the household's survival, clothing was second, third or fourth hand and shoes an expensive luxury (as was still the case in poor urban and rural areas in early twentieth century Europe); ill-health, early death and deformity were normal - 'a man or woman who was not pock-marked, suffering from vitamin deficiency diseases, congenital defects or industrial malformations counted as handsome'. Fear was all-pervasive: of harvest failure, pestilence striking animals or humans, and much more. For most people these fears diminished though for many they did not disappear over these three centuries. One thing that did not change was the rarity with which people washed. The difficulties of doing so for many are obvious, but it still comes as a surprise to learn that Louis XIII did not have his legs washed ('with tepid water') until he was five, in 1606, and did not have his first bath until two years later. Bathing was more common by the later 17th century.

Chapter one examines how women were represented in visual, literary, dramatic, didactic, medical, legal and other sources, beginning at the beginning. Popular depictions of Eve, in collusion with a snake with the face of a seductive woman, as responsible for the Fall of Man from the state of perfection, women responsible for the plight of helpless Man, appropriately open an ironic and elegant survey of a discourse largely constructed by men. Yet alongside models of passive womanhood conveyed in much solemn writing and enshrined in legal codes were the attractions of the Wife of Bath and her analogues in Dutch visual imagery. Though Shakespeare runs a genre of images of clever women, such as Portia, outwitting men, the complex images conveyed by those writers whose popularity has survived, suggests that they may have spoken to the complex consciousnesses of successive generations. An ideal was always set before women, but it was not universal, and we cannot judge the variety of ways in which they received it.

An important component of the ideal was marriage and motherhood as woman's destiny. For this younger women prepared. Trained in the home if they were better off, or through work if they were not; work in the household in southern Europe, in the north in paid work, often domestic service which also enabled them to save for marriage which customarily occurred in the mid-twenties (but much earlier in the south, at least in the early part of the period). Hufton well describes the complex world of women's paid and unpaid work, and the clear and early established gender division of labour in both.

She conveys the variety of reasons to marry - financial security, dynastic arrangement, need for care in sickness and much else but finance over-rode all. And the variety of relationships within it. The 'economy of expedients' in which the poor perpetually struggled might necessitate flexibility. Hufton gives an example of a family in late eighteenth century rural Wales, following terrible harvest. The wife told her husband:

I'll make a bargain with thee: I'll see to food for us and both the children all winter if thou, in addition to looking after the horse, the cattle and pigs, wilt do the churning, wash up, make the beds and clean the house.

He did, she knitted wool and they survived. The vivid, well-chosen example is an important and effective component of Hufton's technique.

Few married women could be idle, save, if they chose, at the highest social levels. If they could afford servants for housework, running the household was to participate in running the business enterprise of an artisan or farmer. If they could not, domestic work was heavy and time consuming:

By the end of the eighteenth century a working class woman in cities and towns would spend up to two hours a day queuing for water and carrying the pails home...Mediterranean women waged a continuous battle against bedbugs and insects were everywhere..simple meals could demand abundant ingenuity and even keeping the fire fuelled was another time-consuming task.

For poor women this did not change until well into the twentieth century. Modern studies which seem to show that women spend as much time on housework as they ever did take too little account of how its nature has changed.

In the nature of things not all marriages were even tolerable, but lived out 'in an unremitting hell' from which the relatively high probability of widowhood was a relief. The near impossibility of obtaining divorce - enforced by men who had never been abused or suffered an unwanted pregnancy - is vividly surveyed. So is the legal treatment, and glimpses of popular perception of rape, prostitution and extra-marital sex in the 'guilt culture' which officially pervaded early modern Europe.

The chapter on witchcraft cuts with characteristic sharpness and clarity through the clichés about witch persecution as a sexual power struggle in which powerful women were crushed by men, drawing a no less dramatic but more complex picture in which the shifting obsessions of the Church inter-related with local and personal conflicts.

For me however the most powerful and original chapter concerns the relationship of women with the churches - though as a modern historian there may be things that I have missed. Without question religion framed the lives of everyone. The churches worked hard to regulate gender roles as they sought to regulate everything and did so in such a way as to ensure the subordination of women. At this general level Protestants and Catholics differed little. Yet Catholic convents offered women an alternative to marriage and childbirth and the opportunity to develop scholarly and artistic skills. Women formed orders, such as the Ursulines which enabled them to work out in the world as teachers and social workers. When the Ursulines were confined in convents from 1612, another order the Sisters of Charity soon emerged to take on their role

and grew rapidly. Through the Roman Catholic church large numbers of women initiated and participated in a highly professional way in a range of essential charitable initiatives, with which married women, who were not members of religious orders might be associated. In France from the late 17th century single women were trained by the Church as beates, to live alone in villages as ancillaries to the priest providing social work and religious instruction apparently successfully. Hufton points out that by the Revolution about one in 120 Frenchwomen was committed to a life demanding celibacy and charity and involving a clear social purpose. Florence Nightingale commented that if Britain had admitted the Sisters of Charity her own efforts would have been unnecessary.

For all the limitations the Catholic Church provided women with roles which women 'seeking to maintain a dignified single state' in Protestant Europe might well have envied. Protestantism rejected convents and celibacy. It offered some women other opportunities in particular encouragement of literacy and self-expression often through writing. The Dutch Calvinist church admitted women as deaconesses and after 1630 they could preach. Some English sects encouraged assertions of female equality (early evident among the Levellers). The Quakers in particular encouraged philanthropic work. So even the Churches played a more ambiguous and more positive role than might be expected in the complex changes that affected women in early modern Europe.

Hufton also discusses women as writers and as rioters, always making us hold on to our sense of proportion when other historians are losing theirs: pointing out for example that although it is very easy to become entranced by the pervasiveness of 'riot' when that is what you study, the vast majority of Europeans lived their lives without encountering one. She concludes by tracing the involvement of women in the French Revolution: initially supportive and hopeful, in the end resistant to the failures of the Republic for attempting to destroy the certainties of their lives whilst replacing them with nothing. For this 'women' were blamed for undermining the Revolution, as male Republicans displaced from themselves blame for the mess they had made of the republic. Once again, remarks Hufton, Man blamed Eve for shutting him out of the earthly paradise. There is a parallel in the habit of left politicians, historians and sociologists in twentieth century France and Britain of blaming female conservatism for electoral failures, which more often than not are the result of the blunders of politicians.

Having started out with criticism of sweeping narratives of progress or decline, Hufton is, in the end, properly cautious. It is too complicated a story to be encased in simple interpretative boxes, and too much is not yet known. But the volume certainly does not fall apart into random anecdotalism but greatly enriches our understanding of gender relations over time. The bibliography will need tidying up in the next edition, and the chapter called 'Parenthood' in the reference section appears, more accurately, as 'Motherhood' in the text. But these are minor problems. Above all, it is very enjoyable.

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