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A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889-1940

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This is a wonderful book. It invites a range of responses: from engaged discussion, heated argument to personal reminiscences. Yes, it is charged with emotion: but the emotion is mostly a fine anger at the way a professional woman historian, who made a considerable contribution to the development of her discipline has been forgotten or, at best, patronised by male historians who have dominated the discipline since the Second World War. Eileen Power was the second woman to be appointed to a Chair in Eco nomic History at the London School of Economics (the first was Lilian Knowles, who was also a wife, mother and conservative figure). Eileen Power was in a completely different mould to her predecessor. She was a feminist. She believed in the higher educat ion of women and the need for pioneers among educated women to pursue successful careers and become role models for the next generation. She did not though, in any way resemble the caricature of the dedicated blue-stocking. She was not personally aggressi ve. In fact, this biography reveals her to have been quite the opposite. Its pages abound with testimony to her wit, intelligence, beauty, social poise, goodness. Indeed, she seems to have been a veritable paragon and it seems that the men she worked clos ely with all fell in love with her.

Two of the latter, who worked with her in the 1920s at the London School of Economics, were R.H.Tawney and M.M.Postan. And there is the rub. Two of the most famous and influential historians in London and in Cambridge have been duly accorded the accola des they deserve and their work has inspired generations of students in the discipline and, especially in Tawney's case, far beyond. The woman they loved however, has not been remembered in this way. Partly her misfortune was to die young, of a heart atta ck, when she was only 51. Yet even her obituaries did not dwell on her contribution to her subject. What people wanted to remember, in the great sadness that is always felt at premature death, was her gaiety, her love of life, her beautiful clothes, her a bility to inspire affection. What Maxine Berg in this biography is determined to show, however, is that this treatment of her was part of another agenda. Cultural forces have been at work in determining the way in which Eileen Power has been remembered or forgotten. The central thesis of this book is nothing less than an attempt to peel away the onion slices of cultural perceptions which surround the history of the discipline of economic history to which Power devoted her life - to reveal that these perce ptions were gendered. To do this, it is necessary to engage in the thankless, but deeply interesting task of trying to see the way in which Power was working to shape the discipline during her life time which was so soon superseded. Her biography thus bec omes a recasting of formerly accepted views of the evolution of the

discipline. Maxine Berg brings to her task a formidable grasp of the historiography of the subject which she then submits to a feminist critique. This is the prime stimulus for the engage d discussions which will be generated by reading this book.

Maxine Berg's own stimulus seems to have come from Joan Thirsk (1) and Natalie Zemon Davis, especially the latter's article: *History's two bodies* American Historical Review, 93 (1988). In this article, Natalie Davis compares and contrasts the wor k of Marc Bloch and Eileen Power, both trying to establish the framework for an historical approach to understanding social change. The work of Power was a revelation for Davis as she had been unfamiliar with it before. That was the starting point for Ber g. Why was Eileen Power so unknown? What exactly was her legacy and why had it been forgotten? One's reputation after death is always in the hands of others and the collective historiographers of economic history had just failed to sustain her memory. It is at this point that the engaged discussions aroused by the book under review move to heated argument. Maxine Berg is not afraid to tilt against the canon. J.P.Kenyon, David Cannadine, Peter Clarke, Donald Coleman are all indicted for offering gendered interpretations of the development of the discipline. Donald Coleman even went as far as dismissing Eileen Power as a populariser of the subject, the writer of "a cosy sort of social history, short on the analytical and strong on the picturesque".

Anger moves to irritation with David Cannadine. His biography of G.M.Trevelyan (G.M.Trevelyan. *A life in History* London, 1992) provides the perfect counter-point to Berg's study of Power. His subject is: male, super successful historian, born i nto a family of privilege and expectations; her's: female, excellent but forgotten historian, who made her career despite personal family misfortunes and few expectations. Trevelyan famously wrote social history `with the politics left out'; Power may hav e started working on the borders of social history and literature but she moved on to write economic history with the people left in. Trevelyan was arguably the most successful popular historian ever with huge sales of his works; Power's early and most fa mous work Medieval People (written in the social history\literary genre) was also extremely popular, though her sales did not match his. Nothing particularly contentious here. Facts are, after all, facts. Yet Cannadine's ultimate sin in his biography of Trevelyan, which is particularly poignant to the biographer of Power, is not his facts. It is his failure to question commonly held views of biographers of nineteenth and twentieth century male historians on the contributions made to their major works by women closely related to `the great man', and the influence they may have had. Trevelyan had a wife, Janet Penrose Ward, who like many other academic wives of the period, acted as a kind of unacknowledged assistant to her husband. Cannadine appears to acq uiesce with the view that her role was little more than an extension of her household and family duties. He gives her two lines of faint praise: she was "well connected, independent-minded, public-spirited, and more than averagely intelligent" (p.10) and more or less excludes any further discussion of her in the rest of the biography.

Berg is particularly sensitive to this as her problem is exactly the reverse. Eileen Power's memory is inextricably tied up with that of her famous husband, M.M.Postan. Ten or twelve years her junior, he was her research assistant and he learnt his me dieval economic history from her. After her death, Postan was one of the figures who pushed the development of economic history ever further along the path of the study of economic development in the past. His reputation soon obliterated hers and, as it d id so, his versions of her work and their collaboration together shifted over the years. What is a biographer to do in the face of an assessment of Power's academic contributions to her discipline from a person who must be deemed the closest to both her a nd the subject? Bravely she sets out to construct the life of Eileen Power from the surviving evidence, regardless of the received views. Power was, in any case, in her thirties and an established academic before she met M.M.Postan and it was a great surp rise to her friends when she finally married him three years before her death at the age of forty eight. More than half of this biography is devoted to the pre-Postan period and the route by which Eileen Power was able to rise to such academic eminence. I t is a story which balances the personal with the public and contemporary context of the women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Eileen Power was born into the upper middle class respectable bourgeoisie but when she was only three years old, her family was brought into disgrace by her father, a stockbroker who committed a major fraud

and forgery for which he served a prison sent ence. He brought ruination not only to his immediate family but also to his brother-in-law who was in partnership with him. Nevertheless, Eileen's mother's family cared for his three little girls, though Eileen's mother herself died of tuberculosis when E ileen was only fourteen. Eileen as the eldest, took on the responsibility of caring for her sisters, to whom she was very close, especially to Rhoda, her middle sister. There was never any question that Eileen could do anything other than earn the means t o keep them all. Well connected marriages were not to be had for children from disgraced families. Yet Eileen was fortunate in one respect. Her early life coincided with the one of the most vigorous periods of the women's movement. The provision of higher education for women, the prospect of opening up careers for women in middle class professions and the campaign for the female franchise, all offered hope to women of talent and determination. Women were helping women out of the quagmires of social conven tions which dominated the English upper classes. Her mother wanted her daughters to have the best education possible. Her aunts took the girls to live in Oxford so that they could attend the best of the Girls Public Day School Trust schools and Eileen wor ked very hard and won a scholarship to Girton.

One of the best sections of this biography is devoted to what it was like to be a female student and then a female don. Berg, like her subject, has been able to benefit from the women's movement which, in its late twentieth century phase, has inspired new work and new perspectives on women's history. She cites Janet Todd, Martha Vicinus, Phillipa Levine, Sally Alexander, and especially Carol Dyhouse, amongst a number of historians whose work has thrown fresh light on the experiences of the women pione ers in higher education. Berg has already stated in the preface to this biography that she is not in the business of producing a work like the biographers of political figures, quoting Pimlott's phrase, as "valets to the famous". (2) She states firmly that her interests are those of an economic historian and a feminist. What she produces in her account of Power's early life, drawn extensively from surviving correspondence, is a fascinating insight into the experience of being a woman in academic life in th ese years. There was not only the feminism, there was also the war. The impact of the First World War on Power's generation (she was 25 in 1914) is amplified by references to the experiences of others such as Vera Brittain.

Perhaps the most difficult episode in Power's life for Berg to explain was her travels to the East in 1920. Power was awarded the Kahn Travelling Fellowship, the first woman ever to receive it and she kept a diary of her experiences. Overshadowing the problem of dealing with all the minutiae of the journey and the many meetings is the necessity of explaining why Eileen Power fell in love, not only with China and all things Chinese, but also with the eccentric figure of the Last Emperor's personal tutor , Reginald Johnston. This did not become a serious matter until ten years later, in 1930, when, having met again in China, Johnston proposed marriage and left China for London with the intention of marrying Eileen and pursuing a new career. In the event, they never married, their engagement terminating in 1931. This faintly bizarre episode is testimony at least that Eileen Power, with all her ability to inspire love and devotion, still found herself in an awkward social position in the social conventions of the time and was eager for marriage.

Such matters verge on speculation since personal evidence is limited to the letters that have survived. In this biography, Berg tries to steer a middle ground between private concerns and the public career of Power. Chapters include ones devoted to `Wo men, peace and medieval people' which charts how Power developed her medieval studies and how she became involved, with her sister Rhoda, in popularising the study of medieval history especially through broadcasting. Then there is an assessment of her car eer at the London School of Economics (1921-1940) and her attempts to encourage inter-disciplinary studies. This is followed by a chapter on `Love, marriage and careers' which charts her relationships with a number of men including Johnston and Postan. T here is then a chapter on Eileen Power's medieval history which might have been, perhaps, the pivotal one of the whole book. Here Berg needed to face squarely the implications of where her approach is taking her. What were Power's historical objectives an d how did they change over time? Where does she fit into the historiography of medieval history? Was there something about her work which was explicitly feminist and which has been lost to future generations?

These are fiendishly difficult questions and Berg's expertise is in historiography rather than in medieval history, which is not her field. Power's oeuvre, for all her hard work, was woefully thin on major

monographs. Her Ford Lectures, published as *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History*, after her death in 1941 (and seen through the press by M.M.Postan) were published without footnotes, probably because of wartime scarcities. The work she produced and edited with Tawney, *Tudor Economic D ocuments* 3 vols; with Postan, *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*; and J.H.Clapham, *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol 1; were all very influential undertakings. Her more popular works on medieval people and her efforts to improve the teaching of history in schools were equally influential in other spheres. Comparative history, internationalism and pacifism were causes close to her heart to which she devoted much time. Yet the fact remains that she died young, b efore she had had the time to write her major monographs. That she also died during the Second World War, helped further to obliterate the lines of development of the discipline which she particularly espoused.

What then about the emotion with which this book is charged? Is it really directed to the treatment of Eileen Power by posterity or is it the hidden agenda that has roused Berg's ire? Is it to do more with the way in which economic history has been tau ght and written about in more recent times? Or has it to do with the absence of women in positions of influence within the discipline? It is at this point that the third set of responses to this book comes into play - personal reminiscences. All (the few) women historians of my generation (I was an undergraduate from 1960-1963), know that women's history did not figure large in our studies of history. Indeed, on a personal basis, if it had not been for William Ashworth, who taught me about the internation al economy in the nineteenth century as if it had something to do with people, and who offered a special subject on early Victorian England which encompassed many social as well as economic themes, I might never have become a professional historian. I lik e to think that, as he listened to Eileen Power at LSE, I might have benefitted from some indirect link. In some ways though, William Ashworth's work has been as marginalised as that of Eileen Power. Like her, he was not able to complete major monographs when in his prime, though in his case, it was because he put his institution first in the allocation of his time.

Maxine Berg's account of how Power had to fight for her salary increases, however, does not make for comfortable reading, nor the fact that after Professor Carus-Wilson, no woman has held a mainstream chair of economic history. Perhaps part of the answ er lies in this account of Eileen Power's life and work. Without the support of the women's movement, women would not have gained equal educational opportunities with men when they did. Without the second wave of the women's movement at the end of our own century, fewer women would have recognised the importance of gaining such an education for themselves. Yet what Power's life shows is a willingness not to pursue a career singlemindedly. It is with pleasure one reads of the way in which she built for her self a truly satisfactory life in London, mixing work with pleasure. She enjoyed it so much that whatever other considerations (such as her selfless desire to promote the career of her husband), she did not apply for the Cambridge Chair. It is hard to thi nk of a male academic who would have had similar priorities. Yet the fact that Eileen Power triumphed over adversities and found some contentment is, perhaps, one of the sources of encouragement to take away from this book. It should be read by all curren t economic and social historians (most of whom are men) but especially by all those concerned about the future of our discipline. Maxine Berg should be congratulated for writing such a stimulating book.

Notes

1. Joan Thirsk, `Foreword' in Prior, Mary (ed) - *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (London, 1985). Back to (1)
2. Ben Pimlott , *Frustrate their Knavish Tricks: Writings on Biography* History and Politics (London 1994);
   short version in The Independent on Sunday 14th August, 1994 24-6.Back to (2)

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