H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathryn Gleadle. *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. viii + 321 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-726449-2.

Reviewed by Susie L. Steinbach (Hamline University)
Published on H-Albion (January, 2012)
Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski

All Liminal But Not All Liberal

Kathryn Gleadle is one of the most interesting and scrupulous historians currently working in the fields of gender and politics in the nineteenth century.[1] Her most recent book, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867*, explores the precise contours of middle-class and gentry women's engagements in political cultures in nineteenth-century Britain. Rejecting both simplistic notions of women as rigidly confined to a domestic and apolitical sphere, and of women as emerging political subjects on a path to Whiggishly inevitable enfranchisement, Gleadle argues that many women were politically engaged, and that that reality was consistently problematic. Women were, therefore, marginalized or "borderline" citizens. While Gleadle's argument is not shockingly new to specialists in the field, her broad and deep research and subtle interpretations make this book an important contribution. *Borderline Citizens* complicates not only our current narratives of nineteenth-century gender, but those of nineteenth-century politics generally.

In her introduction, Gleadle asserts that her work emerges out of her wish to understand "how it *felt* for women of the middle and gentry classes to engage in British politics," and why political women displayed such complex, multivalent, and "ambivalent self-representations" (p. 1, emphasis in original). To accomplish this she uses a mixture of historiographical engagement, broad and deep archival research, and theories taken from psychology and sociology. She ultimately concludes that a lack of consensus on what a political woman might be offered both opportunities and challenges, and that women's rhetorical use of notions of female inferiority or dependence, while often tactically wise in the immediate instance, "contributed to the perpetuation of a hegemonic gendered code" (p. 258).

Gleadle's argument that politically, women during this period are best understood as "borderline" citizens, is undoubtedly correct. Furthermore the term "borderline" alerts us to spatial issues, which Gleadle is particularly adept at teasing out to yield important insights about political culture. Gleadle approaches and illuminates her borderline concept from a variety of angles that make the book well worth reading. However it must be admitted that there is a sense in which her assertion is not new. Many historians of gender have argued that, in politics and in the workplace, women were, during the long nineteenth century, spectators, supporters, and members, but rarely leaders; necessary but auxiliary, involved but oppressed, and more successful at local levels and in situations where they had connections and reputations.[2] What Gleadle contributes is a finely grained reading of when they were necessary and when they were auxiliary, and suggests reasons for both.

Critical to Gleadle's analysis is a distinction, made in the introduction, between the "public" and the "parochial" realms. Gleadle concurs with many other historians of gender, notably Amanda Vickery and Jane Rendall, who have worked to challenge or nuance the overly simplistic notion that nineteenth-century society was divided into public and private spheres, with the private roughly equivalent to the domestic, and the public off-limits for respectable women. In Gleadle's new formulation, what was in the 1990s thought of as the public sphere is now divided into two parts: the public, characterized as urban spaces inhabited by people not personally known to one another, and the parochial, defined as "the world of the neighborhood, workplace, or acquaintance networks," in which people were bound together by relationships and proximity (p. 17).[3] Both public and parochial are extra-domestic, but while the public is large, impersonal, and anonymous, the parochial is local and is shaped by relationships and reputations.

The delineation of the parochial realm, and the argument that it was here that women–particularly rural and

politically conservative women–found their largest political opportunities–is in some ways the book's central project. Previous historians of gender and politics have sometimes stumbled in their attempts to explain why–if respectable middle-class and gentry women were confined to the domestic sphere–some women were sometimes active in the public sphere. Gleadle holds that once we see the parochial as a distinct realm, then the cultural logic of the nineteenth century becomes clearer. The parochial–but not the public–was where political women most often asserted themselves and most often succeeded. Certainly, the division helps to make sense of Victorian culture; once we see the parochial as separate from the public realm, we can more consistently perceive and predict where women were most active, and we can make better sense of the situations in which women could and could not, did and did not, claim agency. However there is a level on which the public/parochial divide is simply a more convenient way to refer to something historians have already recognized, and that Victorians frequently articulated: that women were very welcome in local politics, but did not belong in national and imperial politics.[4] This is why later in the century so many Victorians saw no contradiction in defending women's rights to vote and serve locally whilst vociferously opposing the parliamentary vote for women.

Following the introduction, the book is divided into two sections. The first, "Women, Gender, and the Landscape of Politics," presents sustained versions of Gleadle's arguments regarding women and the political process. Chapter 1, "Borderline Citizens: Women and the Political Process," focuses on the gaps between national policy and local practice, uses and responses to single-sex and mixed-sex petitions to Parliament and to local bodies, women as experts and authorities at the national and local levels, and gender and parliamentary space. Everywhere she looks, Gleadle (rightly) sees tensions and contradictions. Frequent instances in which women had local political power because of their economic status made contemporaries aware of the possibility of female political rights, but inconsistent abilities to use those rights "reaffirmed women as secondary" (p. 41). Women's petitions were becoming an accepted part of politics, but mixed-sex petitions were sometimes rejected on the grounds that women's signatures trivialized them. The chapter closes with a fascinating discussion of gender and Parliament. It describes the stuffy "ventilator" area of which women determined to hear Commons' debates availed themselves from the early nineteenth century onwards. Here I wish Gleadle had compared her analysis of women and the ventilator to the work of Laura E. Nym Mayhall and others on women and the "Grille" that hid women in the Ladies' Gallery from view in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and which was the focus of militant activism in 1908.[5]

Chapter 2, "Women, the Public Sphere, and Collective Identities," argues that local contexts and individuals' behavior, experiences, choices, and assumptions, created patterns that shaped women's political experiences and the range of their engagement. Here too we see an emphasis on the local and the contingent and on tensions, complexities, and contradictions. This chapter has another fascinating analysis of space. Gleadle demonstrates that although many political meetings advertised that they provided ladies' galleries, these were, it seemed, a rhetorical device that indicated that there would be a respectable atmosphere and that ladies were welcome and could attend without fear. Neither organizers nor attendees necessarily endorsed the notion of separate gendered political spaces, and at the meetings both women and men were welcomed into both the main floor area and the galleries. While both of these chapters are strong, and certainly present and further Gleadle's argument, the fact that both chapters have sections on space and on mixed-sex politicking reveals some organization issues. Similarly, the 1832 Reform Act is discussed at some length in chapter 1, but is then the topic of chapter 5. Returning to these key events and themes creates a narrative argument that is rich and layered, but sometimes slightly confusing.

Chapter 3, "Women and the Family in Political Culture," explores the ways that family could–but did not inevitably or evenly–provide opportunities for some women to engage politically via a collective familial identity. Gleadle demonstrates that home and family could be, but were not always, a political training ground for women–even for different women in the same family, since fathers who nurtured political daughters, usually mentored only one daughter. Thus if we look at the life of that daughter, we conclude that the household nurtured female political inclinations; an examination of the life of her sister, however, would yield a very different conclusion. Priscilla Johnston and Richenda Buxton, sisters who feature largely in chapter 6, are good examples (though neither is mentioned in chapter 3)–Priscilla worked with their father and was extremely invested in politics as a family enterprise, while Richenda remained distant from electoral dramas.

Chapter 4, "Community, Authority, and Parochial Realms," extends Gleadle's points about local and parochial settings as richer fields of opportunity for

women, focusing on rural areas. While the chapter is somewhat anecdotal, Gleadle has read and researched incredibly widely and produces some wonderful examples, including Norfolk widow and leading light Charlotte Upchurch and two Welsh female landowners. She reveals what was often particular or at least characteristic of female political involvement at the parochial and rural levels–for example, the production of civic poetry rather than prose tracts–but also emphasizes that many women emphasized their class status over their gender in their writing.

The three chapters that make up the second section of the book, "Case Studies and Micro-Histories," extend the arguments put forth in the first part. Chapter 5 is on women and the 1832 Reform Act. Here, Gleadle attempts (mostly successfully) to focus on the relationship of women to the Reform Act, which she contends is widely referenced but still underexplored, while acknowledging the current historiographical tendency to deny the "Great" Reform Act its traditional watershed status. This chapter's most interesting sections are close readings of parliamentary debates and legislation, which reveal "moments of telling indeterminacy … of women as political subjects" (p. 160), and the argument that the end of women's ability to vote, which was very rare, was of far lesser import than the end of freewomen's ability to confer the voting privilege inherited from their fathers onto their husbands. The latter supports chapter 3's reading of families as political sites. As in previous chapters, though, some of Gleadle's points are less new than they seem. The notion that the replacement of older, more local political cultures with a more centralized political system worked to women's disadvantage is not new; the first half of the nineteenth century is already recognized as a period in which local politics gave way to national organizations, to the exclusion of women, who had had greater ability to engage in local and parochial contexts.

Chapter 6, "Land and Dynastic Subjectivity," is on Mary Ann Gilbert, a landed agricultural reformer whom Gleadle unearthed via impressive archival work. Gilbert was a rural paternalist who opposed Corn Law reform and was deeply committed to land management schemes. Her politics and her obscurity both support the chapter's argument that we know enough, perhaps too much, about liberal (and radical) women who partook in pressure-group campaigns and were members of large organizations; now we need to look at provincial landed women, whose politics and "political landscapes were very different" (p. 193).

The seventh and final chapter, "'Doing Good by Wholesale'," is on the family of reformer Thomas Fowell Buxton, including his daughter Priscilla Johnston, his sister Sarah Buxton, and his cousin Anna Gurney. Here the central arguments are two: that only some daughters were selected to be political (thus echoing chapter 3), and that the career of a single male politician could be viewed by both him and his family as a family affair, in which the corporate family authored pamphlets, speeches, and strategies. The politician's career thus functions in much the same way the franchise did for many families: while the vote might legally be the right of the male head of household, all family members concurred that it was in practice family property.[6] Two women of interest here are Anna Gurney and Sarah Buxton, who were both cousins and life partners. Gleadle argues that the tendency in the family to refer to them by their home, as the "cottage ladies," was a way of simultaneously hinting at and containing their domestic relationship (p. 244); here the use of Anna Clark's concept of "twilight" could have been helpful and productive.

But the occasional caveats above should be seen as just that. Overall this book is exceptionally researched, creatively written, and productively placed in a variety of historiographical contexts. It is an excellent work that enriches the histories of politics, gender, family, the middle class, the gentry, and rural society in Britain, and it deserves a wide readership.

Notes

[1]. See in particular her monograph, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, c.1831-51* (London: Palgrave Macmillan,1995), and *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), a collection co-edited with Sarah Richardson.

[2.] See for example Helen Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Ashgate, 2000); Jutta Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991); Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Susie Steinbach, *Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), chapter 8.

[3]. Gleadle here is quoting Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1998), 10.

[4.] See Steinbach, *Women in England*, chapter 9, esp. 279.

[5.] Laura E. Nym Mayhall, "Defining Militancy: Radical Protest, the Constitutional Idiom, and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1908-1909," *Journal of British Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 2000): 340-371, and *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[6.] See for example Matthew Cragoe, "'Jenny Rules the Roost': Women and Electoral Politics, 1832-1868," in Gleadle and Richardson, eds., *Women in British Politics*,153-68.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Susie L. Steinbach. Review of Gleadle, Kathryn, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29396

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.