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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margaret C. Reynolds. *Plain Women: Gender and Ritual in the Old Order River Brethren.* Edited and Foreword by Simon J Bonner. Pennsylvania German History and Culture Series. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. xii + 192 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-02138-6.

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Published on H-GAGCS (September, 2002)

Strength in Submission

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Peggy Reynolds' doctoral research on the Anabaptist Old Order River Brethren focused on the women in this small group. (The Old Order River Brethren now number about 325 members plus another 200 persons, mostly non-baptized children. Most of them reside in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a few in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and another branch around Dallas Center, Iowa.) In the acknowledgements of her dissertation, she stated: "My greatest admiration belongs to the women in this Old Order sectarian group, who demonstrated unselfconsciously their strength in submission, and who performed in unassuming, quiet ways essential traditions to preserve their River Brethren culture" (p. xii). She was interested in the significance of women for the maintenance of this group's culture and identity vis-a-vis the modern world and other "plain" groups in Pennsylvania and elsewhere. For that reason, if for no other, *Plain Women* is an important publication, since few scholars and observers have paid particular attention to women's roles in Old Order groups.

Reynolds did not live to see her doctoral research published, but her dissertation advisor, Simon J. Bronner, has performed a labor of love in editing her work in a fashion that seems to retain her voice and her perspective. The finished product is also a masterful job of editing. Bronner admits to having exercised "considerable editorial license" (p. xi) in preparing Reynolds' manuscript for publication, including giving it the present title. He helps the reader distinguish between Reynolds' ethnographic observations and interviews and the historical narrative in which she establishes the history of the Old Order River Brethren by using the past tense for the latter segments and the present tense for the former. In addition, Bronner consulted with an authoritative member of the Old Order group in order to be able to distinguish between Reynolds' personal conclusions as an outsider about what she observed in her fieldwork and the views of the River Brethren themselves. It would be perhaps more accurate to consider Bronner a "posthumous collaborator" with Reynolds in the final published study, rather than the editor he (self-effacingly) styles himself.

Plain Women is interesting not only because of Reynolds' gender-centered approach to her topic. The study also affords insights of a general nature into the maintenance of a self-consciously separate community through ritual and conscious choice in spite of the pressures of life in close proximity to contemporary mass culture. The special interest that tourism has taken in the plain people of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where most of Reynolds' informants live, has added to these pressures. The centrality of women in maintaining group identity and cohesion soon becomes clear. A thorough introductory chapter on "The History, Religion, and Society of the Old Order River Brethren" establishes the background and necessary base of information for the study. Reynolds' work then moves into its central concerns with an analysis of the symbolism of these women's plain dress for religious beliefs and the role of dress in social separation. The traditions associated with women's hair–its length and manners of styling, the cloth covering worn over it by grown women–are also a focus of this second chapter. River Brethren women speak of the power their hair and its covering endow. Although these women regard the covering as a symbol of their submission to their husbands by God's will, they also assert that their willing acquiescence to this submission is the basis for their partnership with their husbands and the source of their power within the religious community. One of Reynolds' interviewees, Sister Rebecca, expressed the conviction that the covering establishes women's con-

nection to God and so gives them power: "the power is privilege, freedom, and liberty" (p. 79). The complexities of River Brethren women's maintenance of traditions of dress, linked as this is with religious beliefs, relationships among the women, and negotiations with men, are the most fascinating aspects of this study. By making clear her own difficult road to eventual acceptance of these women's self-perception, Reynolds helps other contemporary outsiders to this community, including the readers of her work, understand the seeming contradictions as well.

The third chapter of *Plain Women* explores the varying degrees to which River Brethren women have come to interact with the outside world as a result of the growing need for them to contribute to their families' income. They have done this primarily through the extension of "kitchen traditions" of baking and cooking, viewed as a God-willed "ministry" in the normal course of women's lives and "an informal women's religious role" (p. 105). Practicing this role for outsiders, then, even if it is baking done in the home for sale in the local store or on seasonal occasions, causes a tension between family-oriented activities and market-based demands. The few River Brethren women who open their homes to tourists for family-style meals run the risk of direct intrusions into their families and community by outsiders, and, in some cases, of friction within the community itself. Reynolds' close analysis of three women's commercial enterprises makes clear the variations of interactions with the outside world that women's work make possible. At the same time, her overview of food traditions in this group reveals the extent to which women "are empowered through kitchen traditions to maintain gender identity, ethnic boundaries, and cohesion in the River Brethren home–and thus in the community" (p. 137-8).

Reynolds' final chapter, centering on the unique tradition of the bread-making ritual at River Brethren love feasts, furthers our understanding of the central role that women play in the group. In many other ways, the biannual gatherings in which all River Brethren participate are similar to those of other Anabaptist groups. Preaching by male elders, communal breaking of bread, and ritual washing of men's feet by women make up the day-long ceremony. But in addition, all baptized women participate in a unique bread-making ritual in the early part of the day. Each of them silently kneads and passes small pieces of the communion bread dough until every woman has handled every piece, at which point they put the dough together, roll it out, mark it in appropriate sizes for the communion later in the day, and bake it. During this time the men watch respectfully while an elder speaks on the meaning of the ritual for generating "cohesion and community among the River Brethren" (p. 151). After her interviews with female participants in this ritual, Reynolds concluded that "women's haptic experience in breadmaking gives them a part in the pursuit of holiness exclusive of and superior to the men's verbal and visual experience" (p. 163). She went further to assert that "women have the literal power to 'make or break' the group" because their acceptance of "social customs and gender roles allow[s] this culture to persist in separation from the world" (p. 164). Her views on these matters may be at variance with those of the Old Order River Brethren themselves. But her arguments in this study are persuasive.

At the same time, Reynolds recognized that River Brethren women willingly and gladly accept the customs and roles that maintain their community and that they indeed find "strength in submission." The balance between what appears to be a full and impartial accounting of her informants' testimony and the frankness of her own outsider's perspective is one of the great strengths of this study. The River Brethren with whom Reynolds interacted over a period of several years seem to have recognized this openness and honesty in her, for they welcomed her into their community and shared their lives with her. We are all the richer for that.

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Citation: Linda Schelbitzki Pickle. Review of Reynolds, Margaret C., *Plain Women: Gender and Ritual in the Old Order River Brethren.* H-GAGCS, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6738

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