
Reviewed by Leonard Schwarz (Department of Modern History, University Of Birmingham) Published on H-Albion (September, 2005)

Rosemary Sweet sets her pitch as co-editor early in her introduction: “The contribution of women to urban society and the social constructions of gender and gender roles is hardly mainstream in any of the recent publications” (p. 1); and, “It is an overstatement, but not a complete distortion, to suggest that much of the literature on women in eighteenth-century towns has been conceived in terms of polarities of, on the one hand, the sociable, extravagant, girl about town, the stuff of which patriarchal moralists’ nightmares were made of, who found in the greater freedom and anonymity of urban life opportunities to engage in sexual liaison or to run up enormous bills, and on the other, the Hogarthian-gin soaked haridan, with breasts hanging out and baby spilling from her arms embodying a life of sexual exploitation, immiseration and exploitation” (p. 2). Well, it is a good rousing opening, even if the introduction then immediately proceeds to qualify it, referring to Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s Family Fortunes (1991), Margaret Hunt’s The Middling Sort (1996), and the work of Susan Staves, Amy Erikson, Margot Finn, Joyce Ellis, Pamela Sharpe, and a swathe of other work, all of it important, but not specifically directed towards urban history. Furthermore, the introduction argues that this kind of work is largely absent from volume 2 of The Cambridge Urban History of Britain (2000), which is a little unfair as that book was planned at the start of the decade and almost all the references refer to subsequent publications, but perhaps this is the sort of rhetorical flourish which editors are allowed at the start of an introduction. The introduction then proceeds to a survey of the literature, summarizing some of it and giving the context for the contributors’ chapters. The book was based on a conference in 1999 that looked at women’s experiences in English provincial towns.

There are nine contributors. Sweet herself has written an essay on women and civic life, particularly the role of the mayoress and the aldermen’s wives, rather important people who are omitted from the standard narratives, but who had to be treated with respect if one wished for favors from their husbands and who had pride of place at civic functions. At the top of the tree came the Lady Mayoress of London, who was received at Court, along with her husband. It is difficult to find out very much about them, beyond the official record, but Eighteenth-Century Collections Online has appeared since this book was published and has 561 textual references to mayoresses, and this is a database much stronger on national than on local publications. Also writing within the political sphere, Elaine Chalus has a neat essay on the role of women in the Oxford election of 1754, particularly on how Mrs. Mary Carnell, a prominent shopkeeper in the middle of Oxford having nothing better do at the busiest time of the day in one of the busiest weeks of the year, just happened to come across a treasonable Jacobite broadsheet. Admittedly the paper was lying in a heap of rags (and nearly a decade had passed since the ’45) but that did not hinder Mrs. Carnell from ensuring that everybody heard of this. Coming shortly after a formal challenge to the election to Parliament of Mrs. Carnell’s political opponents, it helped to keep tensions high, and in the end the election results were overturned. The chapter is a neat piece of historical reconstruction. If you were going to play dirty tricks and put unfounded rumors into circulation, a well-connected woman in a public place was what you needed. Mrs. Carnell was ideal. She knew everybody and she made sure that everybody saw her. This essay helps to restore women to the mar-
ket place and to show the actual ways in which female influence operated.

Drawing on her Ph.D. thesis on Warwickshire charities during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Sylvia Pinches examines women as objects and agents of charity in eighteenth-century Birmingham. The difficulty is that very few Birmingham charities left sufficiently detailed records to identify individual recipients. But there were some, for instance those aimed at schooling female children or helping married women—and only married women—with childbirth. Birmingham did not receive its Magdalen Asylum until 1828 and then it was the traditional, popular type of temporary asylum for the penitent prostitutes. The original Magdalen Hospital had come to London seventy years earlier, preceded (but probably not for very long) by the public discovery of penitent prostitutes from good families who had loved not wisely but too well, and had nowhere to go except downhill towards prostitution, disease, and death. London’s example was often imitated during the next century, so Birmingham’s delay in establishing a Magdalen poses interesting questions. The unanswerable questions are the extent to which there was a degree of skepticism towards the standard narrative and also the local poor law’s attitude towards bastardy. As far as the surviving records indicate, Birmingham women seem to have been very selective in their charities. They could, however, be generous: for instance they donated their money to the new hospital, the lying-in charities, and the Aged Women’s Society. Pinches attributes this to Birmingham being a rather new town, with few traditions or garden involvement, no well-established cursus honorum, in which charitable work could play a part, while convention restricted female agency to objects more powerless than themselves. There are some problems with this argument, although it is unreasonable to expect the author to take much account of these within the confines of a short chapter in an edited volume. The essay does what it sets out to do. One could go further, given world enough and time. For instance there is the matter of bequests. Less than a tenth of the subscribers to the new hospital were women, but women also left money to the hospital in bequests. Overriding all this, there is the question of the poor law. Until we know more about this, any discussion of charity is bound to be open-ended, though this chapter shows what can be done in its absence.

Eighteenth-century urban businesswomen increasingly have come onto historians’ radar. Two of the essays examine this: one by Christie Wiskin on Birmingham, and another by Hannah Barker and Karen Harvey on Manchester. Their styles are different, but their outcomes are not so different. Businesswomen were everywhere. “Apparently free from the sort of customary restrictions that women in trade (and married women in particular) were subject to in other English towns, Mancunian women appear to have involved themselves in a great variety of business ventures” (pp. 113-114). The directories reveal them as pawnbrokers, drapers, booksellers, seedswomen, hosiers, tallow chandlers, farriers, linen drapers, staymakers, haberdashers, traders—the list is endless. Many of them were widows, but by no means all. Women were also rather good at working polite culture, through bookshops, libraries, coffee rooms, luxury groceries, as was Elizabeth Raffald who ran a successful shop in a prominent location between 1766 until her death in 1788. Within a week of her death the creditors closed in on her husband. Christine Wiskin paints a similar picture for Birmingham, one of her heroines being Ann Dunn, who ran a large inn in the center of Birmingham and who also developed a stagecoach business. Wiskin is anxious to show the management skills possessed by these women. School teaching may have been genteel, but schools were businesses. About 5 percent of the businesses in Birmingham directories between 1775 and 1825 were run by women, a fairly typical figure for many towns. This is all well done, but will be developed further in Nicola Pullin’s forthcoming book, which will show the elasticity of the law when it came to letting wives trade on their own account. Manchester or Birmingham were not exceptions: England was riddled with exceptions. There were good reasons for widows and never-marrieds to manage a business, but very many married women did so as well, running up their own debts and credits. The legal position can be worked out; but business records are difficult to find and most remain hidden in the darkness of Chancery. What all these works show is the continued retreat of any simple concept of separate spheres.

In an endeavor to “put the consumer back into consumerism,” Helen Berry examines the tastes of Judith Baker, a gentlewomen of Durham. Judith kept account books from her marriage in 1749 until her death in 1810 and always did her best to keep abreast of fashion—that of London, of course, not Edinburgh, although Edinburgh was nearer—while keeping expenses more or less reined in, obtaining her consumer goods in local urban centers as well as the metropolis and wielding her considerable influence in Durham politics. She had much weight to throw around, but did so with proper feminine decorum. She could spend money on horses, but did not miss a trick.
when saving money was concerned—using a local MP’s free postal allowance, selling old kitchen utensils when she bought new ones—and obligingly noting it all. It is an interesting chapter that complements the recent appearance of Maxine Berg’s _Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain_ (2005).

David Shuttleton examines Mary Chandler’s _Description of Bath_, remarking that her “concern with de-eroticised female space reminds us that the English Enlightenment was not merely a self-regulated process of reunification on the part of an aristocratic male elite” (p. 193). Mary Chandler was a Bath milliner, a spinster (“being grown, by an accident in her childhood, very irregular in her body” [p. 178]), who belonged to a prominent nonconformist family; lived a respectable, blameless life; and praised Bath, imagining a city where there was space, although heavily circumscribed space, for female intellectual activity. Chandler was one of those “keepers of the word” (p. 157-158) whom Denise Fowler describes for Warwickshire at a later period, between the 1780s and the 1830s, when women read, write, print, manage circulating libraries, write guidebooks (for instance, to Coventry in 1813), promote education, and play a central role in urban culture.

So, all in all, this is an interesting book and the editors are to be congratulated on shepherding it to its appearance in print. There is also a bibliography and an index. It is unashamedly a book for students of the eighteenth century; most of the articles reflect work in progress and fit into ongoing discussions. But they are focused. They show where things are going, and they reflect the width of urban study and the growing interest in female involvement, particularly middle-class women. It helps us to get away from London. The book will be a useful addition to reading lists.

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