

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sarah Gristwood. *Blood Sisters: The Women behind the Wars of the Roses*. New York: Basic Books, 2013. Illustrations. xxv + 390 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-01831-4.

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Published on H-War (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

History books can generally be divided into two categories: popular history and academic history. Sarah Gristwood's *Blood Sisters: The Women behind the Wars of the Roses* attempts to be both. Despite a valiant attempt and an interesting subject it comes up short on both accounts.

Gristwood follows seven women from the Wars of the Roses: Margaret of Anjou, Cecily Neville, Margaret Beaufort, Ann Neville, Margaret of Burgundy, and Elizabeth Woodville and her daughter Elizabeth who would marry Henry VII. This is clearly a formidable group of women. Gristwood's goal is to situate these women in their rightful place within history, arguing that women have previously not been given due consideration. If this were true, it would make this work an important part of the historiography, yet a quick look at the bibliography calls this into question. In total, Gristwood includes twenty-eight different sources with titles that clearly deal with these women, and several more that include these women in broader studies. One of these is even entitled *The Women of the Cousins' War: The Duchess, the Queen, and the King's Mother* (2011), a study by Philippa Gregory, David Baldwin, and Michael Jones. A lively debate about these women and the roles they played already exists.

Indeed, Gristwood's examination of the women raises some questions. An important part of these women's lives was the act of giving birth because it represented a dangerous event that could result in the death of not just the child but the mother as well. For the Wars of the Roses with its inter-dynastic rivalry, the birth of a son was a necessary step for securing the future. The log-

ical place to deal in-depth with the significance of childbirth would be when the author mentions the first birth on page 37. Instead, it appears with the second woman to give birth, Margaret Beaufort (p. 48-51). Gristwood also does not explore fully some important issues that she brings up, such as alliances built among women "based on sisterhood and liking" (p. 36).

Most distressing is that she treats some legitimate women's issues with a light touch, not probing the events beyond the barest political narrative. An example of this is her discussion of Cecily Neville's role in mending the breach between her sons Edward IV and the Duke of Clarence. The fact that she played a role is barely considered, despite being a prime example of women using their unique powers and position in society to influence the outcome of events. The character of Margaret of Anjou is not adequately interrogated; Gristwood embraces the picture of her as a tiger in a woman's skin without fully exploring this image. While Gristwood does not blame the fighting on Margaret, like William Shakespeare did, there is some legitimate debate about the role she played in the breakdown of governance.[1] In a work claiming to rehabilitate these women to ignore this debate weakens the book's purpose.

The goal of this study is ultimately not to construct a history of the women in the Wars of the Roses, but to construct a traditional chronological narrative describing the Wars of the Roses for those who know very little about this topic. The presence of the women is merely a way to approach this political narrative differently than others have done in an effort to reach a new audience. This becomes clear about halfway through the book when Grist-

wood takes a detour away from the women and their lives to discuss the marriage of the Mowbray heiress because “it showed Edward’s own sometimes cavalier attitude toward the law” (p. 144). The women are used only as conduits through which to examine the actions of men.

If the goal were to produce a solid and valuable work of narrative history for a popular audience, there is a role for that type of history. It even excuses the disappointing notes that explain further some issues but do not do much to show where Gristwood found her information. The chapters with the most endnotes both have nine notes and several chapters have as few as four. There are also some problems with the text. At one point, for example, the author trusts an unreliable source: a chronicle states that the number of men in Clarence’s, Edward IV’s brother, army was thirty thousand (p. 111). This is particularly distressing because it is such an outlandish number that other sources she uses contradict quite dramatically.[2] It seems as if Gristwood did not consider the chronicle’s propensity to exaggerate.

Gristwood ultimately wrote a popular history of the

Wars of the Roses from the perspective of these women. The women here are done a disservice, however, as the political narrative pushes forward, leaving behind some of the issues of women’s social roles and even military roles presented by such examples as Margaret of Anjou. The genre of popular history has value; it can enlighten readers for their own enjoyment and give students a base from which to build more nuanced understanding. It also makes the cutting edge of historical research more widely available. Gristwood’s narrative, however, trusting medieval estimates on armies and failing to examine the debates that already exist about these women, makes this book, even as a popular history, a weak addition to the field.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael Hicks, *Wars of the Roses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 77-78.

[2]. John Bruce, ed., *Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV, in England and the Finall Recouerye of His Kingdomes from Henry VI. A.D. M.CCCC.LXI* (London: Published for the Camden Society, 1938), 11.

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**Citation:** Devin Fields. Review of Gristwood, Sarah, *Blood Sisters: The Women behind the Wars of the Roses*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

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