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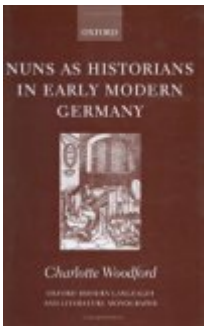
Charlotte Woodford. *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xiv + 229 pp. $74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-925671-6.



Reviewed by Amy E. Leonard

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The last two decades have witnessed an explosion of works on religious women in early modern Europe. Focusing especially on the Catholic Counter-Reformation, historians have shown the complicated waters the women of both active and contemplative orders had to navigate during the religious and political upheavals in their lands. Within this profusion of works, however, Germany has lagged behind. Unlike France, Spain, Italy, and even the Low Countries, few works, particularly in English, exist on what happened generally to nuns in most of the Holy Roman Empire. Merry Wiesner, Anne Conrad, and Ulrike Strasser are among the few in the field with synthetic studies on the subject. So it is a great pleasure to be able to add a new title to the slowly growing canon. Charlotte Woodford's *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany* is a splendid analysis of nuns' chronicles from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, which demands that we reformulate our understanding, first of the convent chronicle genre, and then of what it means to be an historian in this era.

Monastic chronicles can be difficult sources with which to work. They are clearly biased and it is often unclear who the author is, or if in fact it was just one person. Sometimes the chronicle is really more of a collection of various documents from a particular house, often copied over by later generations. But these works often provide the only record of the nuns' voice and how they viewed the world around them. Woodford convincingly argues that, despite their drawbacks, the numerous convent chronicles that started appearing in the fifteenth century were important literary and historical works, as well as crucial representations of the collective identity of the female monastic house. These writings (she looks at roughly forty chronicles from thirteen convents in Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg) were written during some of the most tumultuous times in German history and represent both the women who wrote them and their religious milieu. The authors came from different orders and estates, and their chronicles cover such events as the monastic observance reforms of the fifteenth century, the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, and the Thirty Years' War. They are both works of

historiography as well as eye-witness accounts. The nuns researched their convents' past, gathered documents as evidence, heard oral testimony, and wrote the histories of their houses and the events around them. Far from being enclosed and cut off from the secular world, these nuns and their chronicles bear witness to the changing historical eras.

The fifteenth-century observance reform movements, which encompassed most of the religious orders, provided the first real impetus for sustained chronicle writing in the convents. This reform rejuvenated many of the women's houses, with an increased emphasis on reading and writing, and led directly to the desire to create a written record of events. Chronicles appeared describing the original foundation of the convent and the early observances, along with hagiographies of the early convent inhabitants who had so exemplified them. These works then served as propaganda pieces to rally the women around the cause of reform. Woodford offers a comprehensive and useful overview of this reform and its emphasis on education. She covers a lot of territory in a concise and informative way. It is notoriously difficult to uncover information on convent education, such as what exactly was taught. Further, much previous analysis of nuns' education in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries focused on perceived failings. Almost all of the convent chronicles, along with other literary output from this period, were written in the vernacular, which has led both contemporaries and historians to criticize the intellectual environment and the state of Latin learning within the convents. Judging the nuns by the standard of the male houses, they disparage their numerous works in the vernacular as a clear indication that the women neglected their Latin studies. Woodford shows, however, how the German chronicles performed a critical pedagogical and spiritual function within the house. The nuns' use of the vernacular was an integral part of their devotional life and did not necessarily mean any lack of intellectual or spiritual discipline (as Marie-Louis Ehrenschwendtner and Claudia Opitz have also shown).

The second significant turning-point for the convents, which further inspired historical writing, was the Protestant Reformation, followed quickly by the Peasants' War. The female houses were often the first targets of both the reformers, who attacked the houses (and the celibate life) as useless, and the peasants, whose hostility focused on the often great wealth these houses held. Although certainly many nuns converted and left the houses willingly (the most famous example being Luther's wife Katharina von Bora), many others were forcibly expelled once a territory converted to Protestantism. But many nuns also resisted and refused to leave their houses, recording this opposition in their chronicles. Caritas Pirckheimer (d. 1532), abbess of the Poor Clares in Nuremberg and sister of the humanist scholar Willibald, was the most famous nun to resist the Reformation. Pirckheimer and her nuns recorded the events in the ***Denkwuerdigkeiten*** and Woodford does a great service by detailing the complicated nature of this "autobiography." The ***Denkwuerdigkeiten*** is a collection of eye-witness accounts, letters, petitions and other documents relating to the city council and families' attempts to close the convent and bring their daughters home. Woodford shows that although Pirckheimer did not personally write all of the account, the abbess's mark is all over the collection as she clearly edited and controlled what was written. This chronicle, and others from the reformation era, are particularly interesting as examples of resistance literature. The nuns used the writings to show their solidarity in the face of great turmoil and personal attack (the ***Denkwuerdigkeiten***, for example, proudly claims that only one nun left the convent willingly during the Reformation). The manuscripts helped to "consolidate resistance" and teach both current and future nuns how to successfully stand up to outside authorities. Rough estimates show that in many areas up to 50 percent of the female convents survived as

compared to 20 percent of the male houses, and the chronicles probably played a large role in this success. Using similar tropes with a united goal--to preserve their convents, their history and their religion--these works illustrate the complicated battle the women waged against their local regimes. Taken together, these records provide a manifesto of monastic resistance.

Not surprisingly, some of the most harrowing events and descriptions related by the chronicles occurred during the violent years of the Thirty Years[1] War. Convents were particularly vulnerable, since they were seen as easy targets by the marauding soldiers. Woodford includes four accounts of the war by four different authors. The stories told are detailed and incredibly poignant about what the women went through as war raged around them. Much like holocaust literature, the lesson these nuns seem to want to impart is "never forget." Future generations must know how these women suffered. Woodford charts an evolution in the writings from the seventeenth century as the nuns were more auto-biographical and had more sense of the self. The chronicles clearly show the authors wanting to impart something of themselves to their audience. Nuns wrote chronicles for a variety of reasons, both practical and spiritual: to justify the convent's privileges and rights; to provide exemplars from earlier ages for the current nuns; to present the proper observance and convent prayers; for posterity and future generations to learn from; and as economic guides for how to run the institution. One of the most important functions of the convent chronicle, however, was as a sign of "institutional identity" (p. 46). These writings were not an individual activity for the nuns, but were "written in the service of their convent" (p. 32). These chronicles helped to establish a sense of community--a shared history that built solidarity. They display the continued fighting of the nuns to maintain that communal identity, in the face of all onslaughts, whether it be Protestant Reformers hoping to dissolve them, Catholics looking to enclose them, or marauding soldiers bent on violence.

Because of Woodford's focus on the chronicles themselves, which (as she rightly admits) are extremely biased toward the nuns, her book does skew in favor of her subject. There is little discussion here of the often serious corruption in many convents (sexual debauchery, financial mismanagement, spiritual decline), or the numerous women who decided to leave the cloistered life to convert and marry. Woodford acknowledges the lack of freedom girls had in choosing to enter the convent--the decision would be in their parents or guardians' hands--but she focuses more on the empowering nature of the convent, with its financial, religious, intellectual and social opportunities: "In the early modern period, convents still represented an escape from married life, which offered women the chance to hold important 'professional' responsibilities and receive an education" (p. 30).

Woodford weaves together nicely the narrative of these events with her own analysis of how the manuscripts represent the mind-set of both the nuns and their houses. Although sometimes her efforts to connect these writings to larger literary debates over subjectivity, autobiography, and representation weigh her writing down, in general she brings to life her subject in vivid colors. The book does have some draw-backs, the most obvious being one that will bother few readers of this list: Woodford uses copious quotations in German from both primary and secondary sources without translations. The book originated as her thesis for a D. Phil from Oxford in German literature and Oxford University Press published it without significant revisions. This is a shame, particularly for the chronicle excerpts. There is so little on German nuns and convents in English that it is unfortunate that non-German specialists will miss out on some of the most interesting parts of the book. One can only hope for a future

revised version where translations have been made.

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