

The strength of this book lies in several sources: First, the writer has a clear perception of the elements in the contemporary pattern of male/female relationships in Australia. Secondly, Dixon has ably used modern psychological and sociological theories to wrest a more satisfying meaning from descriptions of how Australian men and women treat each other.

Thirdly, by tracking down those documents which detail the historical processes she demonstrates the burden of history and helps to explain why Australian men reject women so that "we short-change each other pathetically, stunting possibilities for fellowship and the kind of sexual joy that can only go with a rich sense of shared humanity."

Finally, and very briefly, she indicates a way out of the vicious circle of deprecation and self-deprecation that has evolved while men have managed the world. "Men and women finally belong with each other. So after those women, for whom it is necessary, rediscover their worth in autonomous female groupings, they haven't much option but to move out and help men off the hook where they've pinned themselves."

Maureen Baker,
Sydney, Australia

Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village.

MARY CHAMBERLAIN. London: Virago Press, 1975. Pp. 186.

"Few people hear a women's tale"
It is the stories and songs of the ploughboy, farm labourer and poacher that are told again and again. The experiences of the women who worked together on the land--picking stones, weeding potatoes, gleaning the harvested cornfields--are left in the pages of the occasional diary or of the government reports that were commissioned to explore the extent of women's and children's work in English agriculture. Rarely, too, are the women's own stories repeated; rather it is the opinions of the churchmen, the teacher or the bureaucrat that explain what such hard work does to a woman: ". . . not only did landwork 'almost unsex a woman' but it 'generates a further pregnant social mischief by unfitting or indisposing her for a woman's proper duties at home.'" (Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, 1867, cited in Fenwomen, p. 17).

The glory of eluding the gamekeeper, successfully firing a farmer's hayrick, or joining the agricultural union and then finally going out against the local farmers was for the men, not the women. They were left behind in

the kitchens or the fields to worry and to make ends meet for their children and their men: "Mother used to make these boiled puddings. Supposed to be meat puddings, but there was just a little piece of meat for father. Father had the meat and we had the onions and the gravy." (Gladys Otterspear, 83 years old, p. 35)

Mary Chamberlain's Fenwomen is one attempt to let the women of a rural English village tell what it was like from their perspective. They take us through girlhood, school, marriage, work and old age with forays into politics, recreation and religion. By interviewing women who range in age from their late eighties down to 6 or 7 years, Chamberlain can cover a considerable historical range. The older women can take us back to the times of their mothers and grandmothers, while the young girls and women push us into the future with their dreams and aspirations. With the older women Chamberlain found that the years of low visibility, isolation and the reduced economic importance of their contributions to the family had taken their toll. She remarks how many of the women with whom she spoke had such little confidence in their ability to talk about the past or in the validity and importance of what they had to tell: "I can't tell you nothing, but if you asked my husband or old Dick-So-and-So, they can tell you far more . . ." or "I don't see that that could be interesting for you, you should

have asked my man." (pp. 11-12) However, the tales the women recount are fascinating and invaluable.

Gislea, the village of Chamberlain's women, is not at all like the rustic scene depicted in rural England travel posters. It is a virtual island surrounded by black marshy fenlands--"Black fen they call it around here. Black--for the peaty soil; black--for the mood of the area, for its history and for its future." (p. 11) Although rail transportation came in the 1930s and seriously undermined one of the main sources of employment, it was not until the Second World War that Gislea was connected with the outside world by road. Nearby villages could only be reached by a long walk across the fens which could be treacherous in wet weather. This physical isolation forced the village upon itself. Until recent generations intermarriage was fairly common and it was difficult for women to share confidences "because they all was relations."

The social landscape of the village in the past created further divisions. There were at least two separate communities. "My mother wouldn't let us mix with East end folk, the poachers and that. There were two different villages. I was up-town, you see." (p. 36) In addition to the split between the 'roughs' and the 'deserving' or 'respectable' poor, there was the squirearchy who controlled the economy

of Gislea. The grinding poverty of the past pushed men and boys into poaching gangs and various acts of violent crime against the propertied classes and also people of nearby villages. Suspicion of strangers and fear of the unknown have been strong features of Gislea's landscape; features that the people are just beginning to shed.

The past forty years have brought considerable changes to Gislea. The village is no longer a self-sufficient unit. The butchers, bakers, cobblers as well as the dairy, blacksmith and local physician have all gone. Now there is only a small co-op store, a sub-post office cum general store plus one or two other small shops. Prices are high and selection is poor. There are few employment opportunities in Gislea. Most of the village workers have to commute to Cambridge or Ely where there are jobs in the light industry sector. Bus service has been cut back and railservice abandoned, so those who remain at home during the day have only inconvenient bus schedules, bicycles or their own two feet to get about. Few families can afford the proverbial two cars that have become a necessity in commuter communities.

The recent changes in transportation, communications, employment opportunities and landholding patterns in Gislea seem to have almost passed over the lives of women and girls. The

proper sphere of women continues to embrace the family and the home. Women still bear the burden of responsibility for housework, childcare and making ends meet. Significant technological changes have occurred to transform the nature of these activities but they remain women's work:

It was a harder life than we have now, in the fen. But you accepted it. You had to cart all your goods from the village and it was awkward when you wanted to go to the shops because you'd got that journey out and it was just a track down to the fen, on top of the fen bank. And we'd cycle up and carry all our paraffin for the lamps and that on the handlebars. We had to fetch all the water and if you didn't have any water in your rain butt for washing that meant that my husband used to have to fetch it. Though sometimes I used to fetch the water too. Though he didn't like me to do it. . . .it was the only job he didn't like me doing. (Aida Hayhoe, 82 years old, p. 76-77)

It was a full-time job when they were babies, having them so close together. It's not so bad now, though it's still a full-time job to get everything done in a day. I'd love to go back to work though . . . He (my husband) says he doesn't mind me going to work so long as the children aren't neglected . . . (Susan

Isbell, 25 years old, p. 85)

One area that has brought substantial change in the lives of women is contraception--its availability--and a greater sexual awareness. No longer do women have to endure frequent pregnancies from the first years of marriage until menopause. But pregnancy can still ensure marriage although perhaps for different reasons. Children were essential for the nineteenth and early twentieth century farm worker: "That was a shock when I got married. I didn't know nothing. I don't know what I thought I was getting married for. He used to say 'What have you got under your apron? I got to see if you're any good!'" (p. 72) But now, for the young woman, pregnancy can mean a bargaining position: "We use to make love, before we were married in front of the fire at his parents We just used the withdrawal method. I never thought of any other method. Now I'm on the pill. But then I got pregnant on purpose, so we could get married. . . ." (p. 86) The decision about contraception seems largely to rest on the women, both now and then.

Women's work outside the home in Gislea is secondary and supplemental to the man's income. Consequently, the wages paid to women are low and the various local unions are not interested in their membership. Gladys Rushmere, Gislea's postwoman, cannot be a member of the postal union because she is only

considered an auxiliary postwomen-- "They ask you to belong to superannuation and things like that, but they don't ask you to join the union. . . . It's sort of a vicious circle, really. Since we're not allowed to join the union, we can't push in to make suggestions." (p. 106) Work opportunities for women have always been restricted. Younger women commute outside the village, and if transportation becomes a problem or hours conflict with those of the husband, it is the wife's job that is sacrificed.

The older women could only choose between fieldwork and domestic service. As children, most had a taste of fieldwork:

Gleaning we used to go, at harvest, after they had the corn in. We was on holiday from school. That was our summer holiday Mother use to go and take all us children, the bigger ones looked after the little ones in the field. Some of the women had their babies on their backs and they'd give them a bit of laudanum on sugar to keep them asleep. I think most women did that. . . . (Mary Coe, 86 years old, p. 29)

Although many of the words of the women of Gislea suggest little has changed for them, there is a great deal of difference between the young and the old. The women over fifty speak with a vitality that the younger ones lack.

It is not that they mourn the passing of the old ways--"People say 'Oh them good old days.' But what was good of them? You tell me!" (p. 81) The mere struggle to survive brought many women to their knees. But there's a fondness about the past, perhaps because women had to come together more and work together. In those hours together there were moments to exchange stories and thoughts: "We'd be sitting with the older women till the Church bell went (to signify the start of gleaning), and I was sorry to start gleaning, because the best part was before, listening to the older women's stories." (p. 29) The nature of housework and employment outside tends to isolate younger women from each other and older women. There is little to fill the hours of the day except television. The festivals of the village have been replaced by discos and the occasional bingo.

Fenwomen: Portrait of women in an English Village, is a valuable contribution both to the literature of oral history and women's studies. The wealth of material collected through oral history cannot be duplicated, especially in the case of women. The decision to practise contraception, and managing of weekly budgets, the problems of abandonment and bereavement, plus the care and discipline of children are all subjects beyond legal statute or the official contract and thus leave no written record for future historians.(1) One problem of Fenwomen

(though ironically it is also a strength) is the absence of methodological comment. Chamberlain writes nothing about how she found her speakers and whether they are representative of the village social structure. Other than a word or two about the speakers' identities--name, age, occupation, marital status, and the like--and a short introduction to each chapter to give the following words a context, she provides a minimal amount of editorial comment. There's no attempt to categorize and to explain. She lets each woman tell her tale.

Kathy Kuusisto, Halifax

1. Eve Hostettler, "Reviews, Fenwomen," *Oral History: The Journal of the Oral History Society*, Vol. 4, No 1. (Spring 1976), p. 104.

Women of Action in Tudor England: Nine Biographical Sketches

PEARL HOGREFE. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977. Pp. 263.

Pearl Hogrefe is well-known to students of the sixteenth century as the author of important books on Sir Thomas More and Sir Thomas Elyot, two of the most influential of the classical humanists of the English Renaissance. A major chapter in her The Sir Thomas More Circle (1959) discusses how More attempted to demonstrate through the education of his daughters that women were capable of benefiting from the kind of classical education