

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 The festivals of the village have been replaced by discos and the occasional bingo.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.

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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

largely reserved for men and that they indeed had a right to such an education. More's example in this matter was influential in a number of English households, and it was also in harmony with the views of other humanists of the day such as Linacre and Vives, while Erasmus, as is well-known, was converted to the same views after spending time in More's house in company with More's daughters. In The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Elyot Englishman (1967) Hogrefe once more discussed attitudes to women in the Tudor period in her analysis of Elyot's The Defense of Good Women (1540). That Hogrefe should then go on to write a full-length study of the situation of women in the sixteenth century consequently came as no surprise.

Tudor Women: Commoners and Queens (1975) explored in detail both the constant stream of advice to women from moralists urging that they be passive and subservient, and the corresponding limitations imposed upon women by law and custom. The main concern of the book, however, was to show that much of the advice of the moralists fell on deaf ears, and that, in the face of a system of public law that denied a woman almost any rights, there were active women in the period whose vigour and efforts enabled them to achieve high status in the mainstream of life as office holders, business people, guild members and managers of great estates. Furthermore, contrary to normal custom,

though in keeping with the tenets of humanists like More, a number of women acquired a classical education, some becoming writers, translators or patrons of letters. In reality a woman's lot in England, so Hogrefe maintained, was in many instances very far from that of the subservient ignoramus so beloved of divines and lawyers. Indeed, other nations had a saying that "England is a paradise for women, a prison for servants, and a hell or purgatory for horses--for the females have great liberty and are almost like masters."

Hogrefe's study, the first attempt to analyse closely the social situation of sixteenth century English women, now has a sequel, Women of Action in Tudor England: Nine Biographical Sketches. As she explains in her Preface, this work grew simultaneously out of her research for Tudor Women and consists of nine brief biographies of remarkable Tudor women, distinguished in their own particular ways by "the desire and drive to accomplish something individual outside the domestic circle--something they considered a contribution to the public welfare." In some respects one regrets that Hogrefe allowed her research to split in two in this way. Tudor Women attempted to provide a detailed picture of the historical and cultural context, each facet of which was then illustrated by biographical sketches of both middle-class and aristocratic women. It is a historical method that



Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby. National Portrait Gallery, no. 551. Artist Unknown. By kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery

has its pitfalls, and social scientists and a good many historians would no doubt find much to query in Hogrefe's handling of data. Nonetheless the general effect of her book is illuminating and persuasive. By contrast in Women of Action the detailed historical context, so important to our understanding of the achievement of Hogrefe's female subjects, is condensed into a mere nine-page Introduction. Furthermore, her attention is restricted to women (all of whom she had discussed in her earlier book) of royal and aristocratic status, presumably because information for detailed

biographies of middle-class women is not as easily available, though here, surely, is where fresh research could have provided new and significant material. Her selection of nine women certainly shows that there were active women in the sixteenth century who did have an influence in matters of religion, education, politics, letters and public welfare, but her elite group of nine active women is too small to convince us that our general notions about Tudor women need to be revised. Nor can Women of Action really justify itself (as the Preface appears to imply) as an attempt "to emphasize active women who have been mentioned only in biographies of their husbands." Though this may explain Hogrefe's choice of Mildred Cooke and Anne Cooke, her first two portraits, it has no validity in the case of the remaining seven women (Bess of Hardwick, Catherine Willoughby, Mary Sidney, Margaret Beaufort, Catherine of Aragon, Catherine Parr, Elizabeth I), since all have been the subjects of full-length biographical studies. Furthermore Women of Action also appears to offer little in the way of new information, though this is sometimes difficult to be certain about, since, although a list of Notes and Sources is given, the specific sources for individual details in the text are not.

What the book does offer, it seems to me, is confirmation of the all-too-obvious fact that in the sixteenth century marriage was the single most influential factor in providing a woman

of ability and talents with the necessary opportunities for their exercise. Without her marriage to Lord Burghley, for example, Mildred Cooke's political acumen would have had no means of expressing itself in the public sphere, and without her four marriages and consequent widowhoods, Elizabeth Hardwick, who began with a mere forty marks, would never have ended up with an income of 60,000 p.a. and the means of leaving behind architectural gems as splendid as any of those of her wealthiest male contemporaries. Similarly, without the accidents of fate that made Catherine of Aragon and Catherine Parr queens, neither could have exercised to the full their respective talents. Nor, obviously, could Margaret Beaufort, had she not happened to have been wife to Edmond Tudor and hence mother to a king, have wielded her considerable influence in affairs of state. While it is true that a classical education, for those few women who received one, was important, enabling Mildred and Anne Cooke and Catherine of Aragon to earn the respect of men yet of itself an education offered no sure passport to the exclusive realms of the male. Understandably these are not matters that Hogrefe emphasizes but they are inescapably evident from what she says, and they detract from the general impression of feminine independence of action (however limited it may have been in society at large) that she seems anxious to convey to her readers.

Women of Action is thus a disappointing book. Though it is entertaining to have biographical sketches of nine such female worthies all within the covers of a single volume, the real opportunities for the assessment of the status of sixteenth century women through the techniques of biography which seem promised in the Preface and Introduction slip by. Perhaps not until the historical demographers provide the necessary statistical data will a more satisfactory understanding of the status of Tudor women be possible. In the meantime we presumably have to remain content with glimpses of a few remarkable characters who, through the accidents of birth, education, marriage and (in many instances) timely widowhoods, managed to provide posterity with what for the moment must appear colourful exceptions to the general lot of their Tudor sisters.

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