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978-0-521-40278-1 - A Woman in History Eileen Power, 1889-1940

Maxine Berg

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Women's writing has been a subject of enduring interest, but it is only recently that women's historical writing has attracted attention. This is despite the place history was accorded among the arts during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when history represented the highest form of literature after poetry. Clio, the muse of history, was represented as a woman. As a woman she inspired the prophets and bards of history. The muses were appealed to during the Renaissance as presiding over the high disciplines where intelligence, memory and inspiration were required. Natalie Davis has written that the muse 'embodied in her female form the arts that men practiced ... she favoured them from without and represented their activities and the qualities to which they must aspire.'¹

Did the muse write history herself, or were any of her prophets women? It is at first sight difficult to answer this question, for the great historians who are remembered, Thucydides, Gibbon, Hume, Macaulay, Ranke, Maitland and others, were men, and the historical profession, progressing through various schools of history – the German historical school, the Annales school, the students of Croce, and English social history – seemed to be masculine. Biographies of Toynbee, Namier, Bloch and Trevelyan have appeared in recent years. The History Men dominate our view of the profession.

My book stands apart from – and challenges – this tradition of historiography. It is the story of one woman's quest to write history and to make an impact on her discipline and on the culture of her time. I might have chosen to write a general history of female historians, to resurrect the memory of the women lost to the historical profession, and thus to redress the condescension of the History Men. There are now a number of articles in learned journals

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'History's two bodies', *American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1–30.

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which 'reinstate' the careers of interesting female historians.² But among these, and among historians generally in the years before the Second World War, there was one whose character along with the appeal of her historical writing brought her a high popular and international reputation. Eileen Power during her lifetime was just as well known as were R. H. Tawney, G. M. Trevelyan and Marc Bloch. Her story stands alongside theirs in the making of history as a part of the culture of the day. But her struggle to do this was different because she was a woman. However much she may have wished it, or even at times have imagined it, she was not a 'genderless soul'³ before the court of history. Her historical writing should be so judged, but her making as a historian and a public figure was also her own personal story of becoming a woman. I was thus drawn to write about Eileen Power herself. Her individuality mattered to her, and it was clearly this that created her impact. But writing her biography was also a way to bring much more immediately to life the contemporary impact of the new economic and social historical writing, the academic and literary circles in which she lived, and finally her experiences as a woman finding her way in the historical professions at the time.

Eileen Power was the best-known medieval historian of the interwar years, and brought medieval history into general culture. She was the author of one of the most popular medieval histories, *Medieval People*, which went into ten editions, and is still in print seventy years later. She was one of the first writers and teachers of women's history. Together with R. H. Tawney she made a frontier subject, economic and social history, into a prominent part of the historical disciplines. She created a cosmopolitan and comparative

² See Bonnie Smith, 'The contribution of women to modern historiography in Great Britain, France, and the United States, 1750-1940', *American Historical Review*, 89 (1984), 709-32; Billie Melman, 'Gender, history and memory: the invention of women's past in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *History and Memory*, 5 (1993), 5-41; Susan Mosher Stuard, 'A new dimension? North American scholars contribute their perspective', in Bernard Rosenthal and Paul Szarmach (eds.), *Medievalism in American Culture* (Binghamton, NY, 1984), pp. 67-84; Joan Scott, 'American women historians, 1884-1984', in J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), pp. 178-231; Judith Bennett, 'Medievalism and feminism', *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 308-31; Joan Thirsk, 'The history women', in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds.), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen. Women's Status in Church and State* (Belfast, 1995), pp. 1-11; and Mary O'Dowd, 'Irish historiography and women historians in Ireland', unpublished paper presented to the Warwick Regional Seminar on Gender, History and Historiography, 28 February 1994.

³ This phrase is Phyllis Mack's. See her *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley, 1992), p. 10.

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economic history which departed from nationalist and Eurocentric historical traditions. She was famous in her time, and achieved accordingly. She had a career of mainstream scholarly success – she was the first woman to hold the Kahn Travelling Fellowship, in 1920, and she was the first woman to give the Ford lectures in Oxford, in 1939. She taught first in Cambridge, then made her career at the London School of Economics (LSE), and though she was not the first female professor in economic history in Britain (Lilian Knowles was), she was the second, and also achieved this at the age of forty-two. She received an honorary D.Litt. in 1933 from Manchester University, and one from Mount Holyoke in the USA in 1937, and she was made a corresponding member of the Medieval Academy of America in 1936. But Eileen Power's fame and significance reached far beyond the academic enclosure. She also participated actively in the life of literary London; she reviewed frequently in the weeklies, and was a popular lecturer and pioneer radio broadcaster. She combined her work as a historian with journalism and lecturing on contemporary politics from a progressive liberal and socialist stance.

Even more than this, Eileen Power stood for a new kind of history; she organised her discipline and in her own personal style she acted as its ambassador. Most of Power's own generation of medievalists sought such professionalism through the study of institutions and politics as against what they perceived as a past legacy of 'romantic antiquarianism'.⁴ Power sought her professionalism in developing the new discipline of economic history. Together with R. H. Tawney she lifted the subject out of its former framework in economic policy and constitutional development. The social history they both introduced in different ways was integrated with economic history, but was individual and human, as well as wide ranging in its scope and chronology. It was a history that could be conveyed to ordinary people in village lecture halls, in newspapers and over the radio, and to schoolchildren as well as to academic colleagues and university audiences. Alongside Tawney's moral commitment and socialism Power brought to her subject an aesthetic as well as a political perspective. This was something that also set her apart from other female medievalists and economic and social historians. She not only wrote and taught, but she shaped the character of her discipline. In

⁴ Scott, 'American women historians,' p. 181.

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her evangelism for the subject on the platform, radio, the press and the school book, she made the subject glamorous.

Eileen Power's independent stance in bringing together her scholarship and her identity as a woman produced in this way a very attractive alternative public face for academic life. Part of the glamour was made by her own personality, and the kind of woman she represented. Eileen Power stood out from most other academic women of her generation, especially in the historical disciplines where there were virtually no precedents for the kind of mainstream recognition she achieved. For she was no bluestocking, and combined the feminine and the scholarly in a way that few other women of her generation did. Scholarship was set apart for most women from the spheres of gender that defined the place of women – femininity, physical beauty, sex and family life. Eileen Power did not marry until late in life, and she did not have children, but in other ways she crossed this divide. She was a charismatic figure to those men and women who came into contact with her. She was scholarly and beautiful, with a mysterious family background and a progressive, cosmopolitan reputation. Her interests were a potent and exotic mixture of medieval history and literature, the new social sciences and China. She indulged herself in travelling, dancing and fine clothes. Men and women loved her: she had close and intense female friendships, she was engaged for a time to Reginald Johnston, the tutor to Pu Yi, the last emperor of China (the subject of Bertolucci's recent film, with Peter O'Toole playing Johnston), and eventually married her former research assistant, Michael Moissey Postan, who was some ten years her junior and a dazzling figure in his own right, only three years before she died. This personal charisma was combined with a literary and aesthetic presentation of her innovative historical work, lending it a broad appeal.

Eileen Power achieved all this by the age of fifty-one, when she died suddenly. Despite her fame while she lived, she appeared to leave no legacy. Soon after her death she was remembered only as one of the colourful personalities of the early days of the LSE, and for a time as the author of *Medieval People*. In recent years this legacy has extended to a mention in the annals of feminist history. Now we know little of her, and we have forgotten the passions that drove her to write history.

I wrote this book to discover more than the achievement. I wanted to know how this woman came to write history, how she played a

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prominent part in reshaping her field, and why she has since slipped into relative obscurity. When I started to read about her I became fascinated by the emotions that drove her as a young historian to write to a friend: 'You don't know how I long to be able to research & write books all the time ... I want to write books. Oh dear, Oh dear!' and 'I ache for a historic friend at times.'⁵ I wondered about the constraints placed on her career by her gender, constraints she tried to deny: 'The difference is between good books and bad books, straight-thinking books and sentimental books, not between male books and female books', but was forced to confront: 'These silly remarks would not be made to male candidates.' I was inspired by the open, expansive and comparative history she mapped out, through which she expressed her political commitment to the peace movement. Her medieval history provided a 'peculiarly suitable basis' for the comparative method. 'It is so far removed from the present that neither contrasts nor similarities are blurred; each problem appears small and clear; it is

like a little book
Full of a thousand tales,
Like the gilt page the good monks pen
That is all smaller than a wren,
Yet has high towers, meteors and men
And suns and spouting whales.⁶

Finally, I was saddened by the loss of her project which followed fast upon her death. The broadly based comparative economic history informed by sociological and anthropological concepts became a lost byway. Economic history narrowed to the economists' plaything; social history split off and went its separate way. The historians' memory of Eileen Power 'withered like grass'.

To tell Eileen Power's story is not to reinstate a female intellectual against the 'patriarchal silences of the past'. Important as it is to reveal the reasons for those patriarchal silences, this is not the story of a victim of the exclusivity of the male academic hierarchy. Nor is it the case that her achievement was unique among women. In the first place, it was clear that Eileen Power was not alone as a woman in her field. In part, her achievement was based on the prior place

⁵ Eileen Power to Margery Garrett, Power-Postan Papers, in the possession of Lady Cynthia Postan, 17 May 1911 and 10 July 1912.

⁶ Eileen Power, 'On medieval history as a social study', inaugural lecture, LSE, 1933 and *Economica*, 12 (1934), 13-29, at 23.

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that women had created for themselves in medieval history and in economic history.

A number of women, long before they had access to the universities, had clearly achieved prominence in the use of archives and primary sources, going back to the example set in the eighteenth century by Catharine Macaulay.⁷ The opening up of higher education for women from the 1860s created the framework within which women could study history academically. The Middle Ages was also a popular and controversial period at a time of transition from the Victorian cult of medievalism to the new 'scientific' document-based history. History itself was still a relatively young discipline, and medieval history dominated in the universities.⁸ The late nineteenth-century fascination with archives, documents and manuscripts brought with it a turning to more legal and constitutional history on the one hand, and a new religious history on the other. Pioneers in the new women's colleges excelled at this history; their work was notably encouraged by innovators in their fields. Mary Bateson went to Newnham College, Cambridge in 1884, and was taught by Mandell Creighton, the professor of ecclesiastical history. She was an ardent suffragist and liberal supporter, but he 'checked a tendency to dissipate her energy in public agitation on the platform or in the press', and persuaded her that her vocation in life was to 'write true history, and to pursue a scholar's career'. Her work was later encouraged by the legal historian F. W. Maitland, and she left studies of enduring importance on women's monastic lives and on municipal history.⁹ Female medievalists played a prominent part in the *Victoria History of the Counties of England*; in the first volumes published between 1905 and 1911 78 per cent of the social and economic essays were written by women. A number of these had probably been taught by Sir Paul Vinogradoff, the great legal and social historian, and they made extensive use of contemporary records to uncover the lives of the medieval peasantry.¹⁰ Another of

⁷ See Bridget Hill, *The Republican Virago. The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford, 1992). Cf. Thirsk, 'The history women'.

⁸ Rosemary Jann, 'From amateur to professional: the case of the Oxbridge historians', *Journal of British Studies*, 22 (1983), 122-47, at 139; G. Kitson Clark, 'A hundred years of the teaching of history at Cambridge, 1873-1973', *The Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), 535-53, at 541.

⁹ T. F. T. (T. F. Tout), 'Mary Bateson (1865-1906)', in Sir Sidney Lee et al. (eds.), *Twentieth Century DNB* (Oxford, 1901-60).

¹⁰ Zvi Razi, 'The historiography of manorial court rolls before World War II', in Zvi Razi and R. M. Smith (eds.), *Medieval and Small Town Society* (Oxford, forthcoming 1996), chap. 1.

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Vinogradoff's students, Ada Elizabeth Levett, wrote a famous study of the the impact of the Black Death, and conducted pioneering work on the manorial courts of St Albans. She was eventually recognised with a University of London chair in history, but she died before her major work on St Albans was finished and she did not build up a following of research students.¹¹ Elizabeth Levett said of Vinogradoff's influence upon her: 'He taught me to unify my varied interests ... into the great framework of Economics and Jurisprudence, and to bring it to bear on practical social history.'¹² Yet other female medievalists left important books, among them Rose Graham, who wrote about the 'double monasteries' (those Benedictine abbeys with joint houses, but led by an abbess) and Bertha Phillpotts, who wrote on women's legal position, but failed to gain significant academic recognition in their own time.¹³

In the United States too women came to the new colleges opened for them, and studied history initially under men trained abroad in the German methods of historical analysis, based on archival research on documents with findings discussed in the format of the research seminar. One of these medievalists, Herbert Baxter Adams, taught for four years between Johns Hopkins University and Smith College when this was founded in 1870. Among the women he taught at Smith, two were recommended for Ph.D.s, and went on to teach other women in turn.¹⁴ At Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke in the United States, 'generations of young women were inspired to take up careers in medieval studies'.¹⁵ A number came to find their way as medieval historians and scholars in the North American university system during the interwar years.¹⁶

The women who had contributed such vitality to their fields of medieval history and economic and social history were soon written out of the chronicles of the historical profession. J. P. Kenyon's *The History Men* tells us how medieval history dominated in the Universities before the Second World War, but he mentions only the men who occupied major positions. In Oxford these were William Stubbs,

¹¹ Ada Elizabeth Levett, 'The Black Death on the estates of the See of Winchester', in Paul Vinogradoff (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History*, vol. v (Oxford, 1916), pp. 1-180; Ada Elizabeth Levett (ed.), *Studies in Manorial History* (Oxford, 1938).

¹² E. R. Jamison, 'Memoir', in Levett (ed.), *Studies in Manorial History*, pp. i-xix.

¹³ Rose Graham, *S. Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines* (London, 1901); Bertha Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan* (London, 1913).

¹⁴ Stuard, 'A new dimension?', p. 68.

¹⁵ Bennett, 'Medievalism and feminism', 312.

¹⁶ See Stuard, 'A new dimension?', p. 73.

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Paul Vinogradoff, R. L. Poole and F. M. Powicke. In Cambridge after Acton there was F. W. Maitland and J. B. Bury, C. W. Previté-Orton and G. G. Coulton. There were those who dominated the Manchester History School – T. F. Tout and James Tait.¹⁷ There was a similar deletion of women from among the founders of medieval studies in America.¹⁸ Kenyon also examined the origins of economic history in Oxford, Cambridge and the LSE, but confined his list of economic historians to Cunningham, Clapham, Tawney and the Hammonds. Clapham and the Hammonds are credited with the legacy of the standard of living debate, and Tawney with leaving major historical debates in the wake of his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) and his *Economic History Review* article, ‘The rise of the gentry 1558–1640’ (1941).¹⁹

Yet economic history likewise provided important opportunities for women; this was because it really was a new subject, and it soon became firmly entrenched in the historical and social sciences syllabuses at Cambridge, the LSE and Manchester. It was developed in Oxford by those with a background in classics, political and constitutional history, among them J. R. Green, Thorold Rogers, Arnold Toynbee and A. L. Smith.²⁰ In Cambridge William Cunningham, who lectured in economic history, and F. W. Maitland, the reader in English law, helped to shape the school of history: a paper in political economy and economic history was part of the early trips; in 1885 this became a separate paper in English economic history.²¹ Both men encouraged students at the new women’s colleges to take up research in the subject, and Cunningham in particular was a champion of women’s education in Cambridge.

Economic history achieved its greatest popular impact as a frontier subject in the initiatives for workers’ education in the University Extension Movement, and later the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). A number of its leading writers, such as Arnold Toynbee, Cunningham, R. H. Tawney and many others, taught the

¹⁷ John Kenyon, *The History Men* (London, 1983), pp. 177–83.

¹⁸ Judith Bennett argues that medieval studies adopted a pluralistic model: ‘Men have tolerated women in the field, but women have been kept segregated from and subordinated to the mainstream.’ Bennett recounts a number of histories of medieval studies by F. N. Robinson, S. Harrison Thomson, William J. Courtenay and Norman Cantor which ignore the feminine constituency of the discipline. See Bennett, ‘Medievalism and feminism’, 313.

¹⁹ Cited in Kenyon, *The History Men*, pp. 247–8.

²⁰ Alon Kadish, *Historians, Economists and Economic History* (London, 1989), chaps. 1, 2.

²¹ Clark, ‘A hundred years of the teaching of history at Cambridge’, 537, 546.

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subject extensively in these forums outside the universities. Eileen Power was to follow in their footsteps, and to combine her university teaching with WEA and extension classes. Economic history was also one of the new and exciting social science disciplines that formed a major core of the syllabus at the London School of Economics, opened in 1895. There men and women studied together; women were brought into the LSE by its first lecturers, and were given scholarships and academic posts. They were an important presence in a new and exciting institution, and a number of them helped to create an academic discipline still in its infancy. Institutional links were also forged from early on between the women of Girton College, Cambridge and the LSE. William Cunningham taught Ellen McArthur and Lilian Knowles in Cambridge; he also taught as an external lecturer at the LSE. Both women were to follow in his footsteps, Lilian Knowles to a lectureship then chair in economic history at the LSE. At Girton McArthur and Knowles, then Eileen Power herself, taught their students economic history, and opened routes for training and jobs between Cambridge and the LSE.²²

The LSE had a buzz about it; it was somewhere that engagement with the issues of the day mattered, and where all kinds of intellectual initiatives were afoot. The economic history courses brought together all kinds of unconventional teachers and students. Alice Clark was a case in point. For her, historical research was an interlude in a life that contained several other strands. She came to the LSE at the age of thirty-eight without formal educational qualifications, but the LSE and her subject, economic history, were still sufficiently open to accommodate vocation alongside profession. While she was there she took a major part in the suffrage campaign, and after this the Quaker War Relief Campaign, and wrote her great classic, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. Then she returned home to the family shoe firm to become the first British female director in what was to become one of Britain's major private companies.

Intellectual issues were just as important as the institutional framework in attracting women and giving them the opportunity for scholarly achievement. Feminist ideas certainly provided one impetus. There was a series of studies on medieval women by female scholars at the turn of the twentieth century: Elizabeth Dixon on craftswomen in Paris; Lina Eckenstein on female monasticism, Mary

²² This story is told in Maxine Berg, 'The first women economic historians', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), 308–29.

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Bateson on women in English towns and Annie Abram on working women in London.²³ Eckenstein dedicated her book to Karl and Maria Pearson, campaigners for the 'new woman', and later eugenis. Her book argued that in losing the possibility of religious profession with the Reformation, women lost the last chance that remained to them of an activity outside the home circle. 'The subjection of women to a round of domestic duties became more complete when nunneries were dissolved and marriage for generations afterwards was women's only recognised vocation.'²⁴ Other studies were not so directly feminist in their approach, but Eileen Power's first book, *Medieval English Nunneries*, had its roots in the questions about women's history raised at the LSE.

A perception at the time of the practical and moral role of economic history was another factor that attracted women to study the subject at the LSE. This was a time when social policy was central, not marginal, to British intellectual life.²⁵ Concern for contemporary social issues was to suggest the opening up of whole areas of the economy and society to historical enquiry. Social issues helped to create the discipline of economic and social history and attracted reform-minded intellectuals. The writing of a number of these female historians was inspired by these political and social issues, and it too has been forgotten by the annalists of the profession. A good example of this, and of the reasons for such amnesia, is provided by David Cannadine's 'The past and the present in the English industrial revolution, 1880-1980'.²⁶

Cannadine's survey of changing perceptions of the industrial revolution by economic historians raises the question of whether successive generations of historians rewrote their history in accordance with the preoccupations of the present. He argues that early cataclysmic and pessimistic interpretations of the Industrial Revolution were influenced by contemporary fears over national decline or

²³ Bennett, 'Medievalism and feminism', 315; E. Dixon, 'Craftswomen in the *Livre des Métiers*', *Economic Journal*, 5 (1895), 209-28; Lina Eckenstein, *Women under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between AD 500 and AD 1500* (Cambridge, 1896); Mary Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs*, Selden Society 18 and 21 (London, 1904 and 1906), vol. 1, pp. 222-30, vol. II, pp. c-cxv and 102-29; Annie Abram, 'Women traders in medieval London', *Economic Journal*, 26 (1916), 276-85.

²⁴ Eckenstein, *Women under Monasticism*, p. viii.

²⁵ José Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography* (Oxford, 1977); Jay Winter, 'Introduction', in J. M. Winter (ed.), *History and Society: Essays by R. H. Tawney* (London, 1978), pp. 1-35.

²⁶ David Cannadine, 'The past and the present in the English industrial revolution', *Past and Present*, 103 (1984), 149-58.