

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*A woman in history* tells the fascinating story of the life and work of Eileen Power, a major British historian who once ranked in fame alongside Tawney, Trevelyan and Toynbee. Drawing on Eileen Power's personal correspondence and diaries, as well as the vivid memories of the many people who knew her, Maxine Berg recreates the life of this charismatic personality whose interests were a potent and exotic mixture of medieval history and literature, the new social sciences and China.

Eileen Power was the best-known medieval historian of the interwar years. She wrote one of the classic medieval histories, *Medieval people*, which is still in print today. An active participant in the campaign for women's suffrage, she became one of the first writers and teachers of women's history. She made her career as lecturer then as professor at the London School of Economics and, together with R. H. Tawney, turned a frontier subject, economic and social history, into a prominent part of the historical disciplines. She defined her subject as comparative and international in her passionate engagement with the forces of nationalism and militarism. Her major works on trade, merchants and comparative economic history were conveyed in writing that was individual and human, rich in narrative and ranging widely over time and place. In her evangelism for the subject on the lecture platform, on the radio, through the press and in the school-book, she made her subject glamorous, and her history became compelling reading and listening to a whole generation. Yet when she died prematurely at the age of fifty-one, her legacy to history was lost, and now we have largely forgotten her and the passions that drove her to write history.

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

A WOMAN IN HISTORY  
EILEEN POWER, 1889-1940

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-40278-1 - A Woman in History Eileen Power, 1889-1940  
Maxine Berg  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# A WOMAN IN HISTORY EILEEN POWER, 1889–1940

MAXINE BERG

*University of Warwick*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521402781](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521402781)

© Cambridge University Press 1996

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1996

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Berg, Maxine, 1950–

A woman in history – Eileen Power, 1889–1940 / Maxine Berg.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 40278 6. – ISBN 0 521 56852 8 (pbk.)

1. Power, Eileen Edna, 1889–1940.

2. London School of Economics and Political Science – Faculty – Biography.

3. Women historians – Great Britain – Biography.

4. Medievalists – Great Britain – Biography.

5. Great Britain – Historiography. 6. Middle Ages – Historiography.

7. Europe – Historiography. I. Title.

DA3.P69B47 1996

940.1'092–DC20 95–34779 CIP

[B]

ISBN 978-0-521-40278-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-56852-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in  
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,  
or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Information regarding prices, travel  
timetables, and other factual information given in this work is correct at  
the time of first printing but Cambridge University Press does not guarantee  
the accuracy of such information thereafter.

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*For my daughters  
Frances, Gabriel and Jessie*

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-40278-1 - A Woman in History Eileen Power, 1889-1940  
Maxine Berg  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---



Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-40278-1 - A Woman in History Eileen Power, 1889-1940  
Maxine Berg  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 Introduction	i
2 Family, friends and college	14
3 Becoming a historian: Paris, London and Cambridge 1910–1920	55
4 Travelling east	83
5 Women, peace and medieval people	110
6 The LSE, economic history and the social sciences 1921–1940	140
7 Love, marriage and careers	171
8 Eileen Power’s medieval history	200
9 World history and the end of the world	222
10 Clio, a muse	246
<i>Appendix: ‘Pekin’ by Eileen Power</i>	263
<i>Bibliography</i>	266
<i>Index</i>	285

*Illustrations*

2.1	Beryl, Eileen and Rhoda Power, aged approximately four, seven and five. Reproduced by permission of Lady Cynthia Postan	<i>page</i> 16
2.2	Rhoda, Beryl and Eileen Power with their mother, Mabel Grindley Clegg Power (c. 1896–7). Reproduced by permission of Lady Cynthia Postan	19
2.3	EEP (Eileen Power), KmSR (Catriona Marion Stewart Robertson (later Lady Garrett)), MLG (Margery Garrett (later Spring Rice)), Puppy Jones (Margaret Jones (later Game)). Reproduced by permission of the mistress and fellows, Girton College, Cambridge	44
2.4	(Mary) Gwladys Jones D.Litt. as director of studies in history at Girton and vice-mistress. Reproduced by permission of the mistress and fellows, Girton College, Cambridge	48
3.1	Eileen Power as a young don in her rooms at Girton. Reproduced by permission of Lady Cynthia Postan	79
3.2	Eileen Power teaching at Girton, c. 1919. Reproduced by permission of the mistress and fellows, Girton College, Cambridge	80
4.1	Eileen Power in the year of the Albert Kahn Travelling Fellowship, 1920–1. Reproduced by permission of Lady Cynthia Postan	84
6.1	Eileen Power at the London School of Economics. Reproduced by permission of Lady Cynthia Postan	141
6.2	R. H. Tawney at work on WEA affairs, early 1930s. Reproduced by permission of the Workers' Educational Association	149
6.3	Invitation to 'Dancing in the kitchen'. Reproduced by permission of Sir Michael Clapham	154

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	xi
7.1	Reginald Johnston in the sable coat given to him by the last emperor of China in the Forbidden City, Peking, 1922, National Library of Scotland. Reproduced courtesy of the Merchant Company Education Board	173
7.2	Postan with postgraduate students in anthropology, 1926. Left to right: Camilla Wedgwood, Hortense Powdermaker, Munia (Michael) Postan, Miss Shirtcliffe. Reproduced courtesy of Professor Sir Raymond Firth	188
9.1	H. G. Wells with Professor Eileen Power at a theatrical première in the late 1930s. Reproduced by permission of Lady Cynthia Postan	226
9.2	Eileen Power broadcasting, February, 1933. © BBC	231
9.3	Rhoda Power at the BBC. © BBC	232

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-40278-1 - A Woman in History Eileen Power, 1889-1940  
Maxine Berg  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

Like many economic historians of my generation, I first read *Medieval People* and *The Medieval Wool Trade* when I was an undergraduate, but reflected little on the historian who wrote them. *Medieval Women*, first published during the 1970s, was a founding text and inspiration of the new women's history. Passed among graduate students and young lecturers, it was a bond among female historians. But I only discovered Eileen Power as a historical figure in her own right during the early 1980s when I was writing my book *The Age of Manufactures*. This was a study of industries and work during the eighteenth century, emphasising the place of family and women's labour. My secondary sources were limited, and I was drawn back to books written by Alice Clark, Dorothy George, Joyce Dunlop, Dorothy Marshall and Lilian Knowles. The prefaces to their books established their connections with each other through the LSE, and in some cases also through Girton College, Cambridge. Eileen Power's name appeared frequently in these prefaces and in many others of the period as my net spread wider. A search for material on the eighteenth-century economy thus opened my eyes to the existence to a whole group of female economic historians writing in the interwar years, and to the central place played in this group by a medieval historian. I told the story of these 'first women economic historians' at a launching session of the Women's Committee of the Economic History Society at the annual conference of the Society in 1988. I decided thereafter to focus on Eileen Power. Not a biographer by experience or inclination, I owe this change in my approach to a suggestion made by Sir Keith Thomas after a seminar presentation of an early version of the paper in 1989.

I have not written this biography as a professional and official biographer with access to a large body of family papers. Indeed, I was told at an early stage that Eileen Power's personal papers had been destroyed by her sisters after her death. My concerns are not

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

those of the political biographers, 'valets to the famous', now in a state of anxiety over the literary merit of their enterprises.<sup>1</sup> Nor are they those of the medieval historian. But I am an economic historian and a female historian. As a biography this book makes no claims to be definitive; new material and new perspectives in future will, no doubt, recast some of what I have written. I have tried to set Eileen Power in the intellectual and cultural history of her generation, to analyse her work and the contribution she made, and with this to uncover what I could from fragmentary evidence the details of her personal life, the longings and disappointments as well as the successes and pleasures she experienced as a woman. I hope the picture that emerges of her provides the combination of serious analysis of her work and reconstruction of the personality that made her so much more than the books and articles she wrote.

I am grateful to the Women's Committee for support, and for the new focus of interest it gave me in the historical association founded seventy years ago by Eileen Power, R. H. Tawney and Ephraim Lipson. Many members of the Society have been very generous with ideas and suggestions, and sometimes recollections. Negley Harte and Theo Barker, guardians of the Society's memory, had not thought much about the women before, but they then told me many stories and put me on to many connections. John Hatcher helped me with the medievalists and with some key sources. Maurice Beresford and the late William Ashworth gave me their memories. I have interviewed and spoken to many others: Marjorie Chibnall, Elizabeth Crittall, Sir Raymond Firth, Sir John and Lady Habakkuk, Christopher and Bridget Hill, Joan Thirsk, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Lord Briggs, A. F. Thompson, Professor Chimen Abramsky, Jean Floud, Marjorie Durbin, Nadine Marshall, Sir Michael and Lady Clapham, Martin Robertson and Eleanor Robertson. I have corresponded with and talked to many others too numerous to list, but their names appear in various footnotes.

Two key articles helped me during the early stages of my writing – Joan Thirsk's foreword to *Women in English Society 1500-1800* edited by Mary Prior, and Natalie Zemon Davis' 'History's two bodies'.<sup>2</sup> I have been grateful for suggestions and information at an early stage

<sup>1</sup> See Ben Pimlott, *Frustrate Their Knavish Tricks: Writings on Biography, History and Politics* (London, 1994); short version in *The Independent on Sunday*, 14 August 1994, 24-6.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Thirsk, 'Foreword', in Mary Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (London, 1985), pp. 1-21; Natalie Zemon Davis, 'History's two bodies', *American Historical Review*, 93

Cambridge University Press

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

Maxine Berg

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

to Peter Linebaugh, Ludmilla Jordanova, Jay Winter and Fernanda Perrone. Kate Perry, the archivist of Girton College, Cambridge and Lois Reynolds, research assistant on the History of the School Project at the London School of Economics (and also my indexer), gave me more support and information than anyone could expect. The Simm Fellowship at the University of Manchester gave me a year's teaching leave to research and to write. Eileen Power recognised the significance of female friends to her life, her career and her writing. Ruth Pearson, Phyllis Mack and Pat Hudson have played that part in my life. John Robertson, Elspeth Robertson and Phyllis Mack read my early drafts, and pressed me for more information, better organisation and better writing. Sir John Habakkuk, Joan Thirsk and Claire Tomalin all read the book. Sir John Habakkuk pointed me towards important aspects of Eileen Power's family background, and provided helpful information on a number of interwar historians. Joan Thirsk was not only a most careful reader: her own commitment to the 'History Women' has been a constant support. Claire Tomalin's interest, advice and above all encouragement came at a crucial stage. I am grateful to Richard Fisher and especially Ruth Parr at the Cambridge University Press for their advice on the book, and to Ruth Parr herself for all her hard work in pushing the book through the process of publication.

This book could not have happened without the papers and information provided by Lady Cynthia Postan. She has not given me access to everything she knows and all the papers she has, for some of these things are entwined with her own life. But she has provided me with all that she could. She has kept careful guardianship over the memory of a woman she never knew, the first wife of her husband. It is to her that we owe the publication of *Medieval Women*, and I am deeply indebted to her for her insight into the personality, indulgences and frivolities that were part of the making of this scholarly woman.

The Robertson sisters, to whom this book is dedicated, have grown from babies to young girls during the making of this book, and they think it is time to stop sharing their mother with the Power sisters. John Robertson, my husband and fellow historian, has been not just a husband but 'a historic friend'. He has read my typescripts and demanded that I write better, and he has listened with sympathy and understanding as I have tried to be an economic historian.

(1988), 1-30; Maxine Berg, 'Introduction', in Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain 1700-1820* (1st edn, London, 1985), pp. 15-20.