

*I should like to dedicate this very short study to Sir James Holt,
founder of the Stenton lecture and a man not only of great learning
but of fairness and generosity of spirit. I owe him much.*

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I joined the History department in this university in the late sixties when the concern emerged to construct a past for women, the largest missing presence as it then seemed in the canon. It was a good time to be at Reading. Expansion was the order of the day and no one talked about economic crises. There was a marvelous clutch of medieval and early modern European historians and the wider political framework was one of optimism that change was on the agenda. Jim Holt, now Sir James Holt, was a creative and energetic head of department. Academics did not live in the straitjackets of QAAs and RAEs; and personality and diversity rather than uniformity seemed the desiderata. Debts were modest at both the institutional and the student level. Reading was populated by many amiable ghosts and resonated with stories of how a fledgling university was developed. There was more than a soupcon of eccentricity.¹

The Stenton lecture was founded to keep alive both a medieval tradition and preserve the memory of a man (and his wife) who distinguished medieval British History for several decades and were critical in the shaping of the History department at Reading. Indeed, an instruction given to the annual Stenton lecturer is that a reference must be made to the name of Stenton.

Of the lectures I attended during my twenty year spell at Reading, all chose Sir Frank Stenton for such mention. My point of departure, however, will be his wife Doris, Lady Stenton, usually described by the adjective, formidable, who died in 1994 having retired from the department in 1984, and whose memory was still alive and well when I arrived.

The Stentons, it must be understood, were a couple, a pair, a team in quite a modern sense. When University College, London wanted to elect Sir Frank Stenton to the Astor chair they realised that inducement must also include a post for his wife. That he or they refused in favour of the life they had here in Reading may have surprised those who saw academe as hierarchied and the Astor chair high up the ladder of glory. But on close examination the decision is not so surprising. While Stenton was Vice Chancellor (the one who clinched the deal on Whiteknights Park and hence demonstrated he knew a thing or two about the value of land), Lady Stenton ran the History department. They were in a very real sense *installés* in their fiefdom. London could hold few attractions.²

¹ I should from the outset confess that the University of Reading is not for me a neutral commodity. I regard the two decades I worked there and my close association with my fellow European historians Malcolm Barber, Angus MacKay and Patricia McNulty as something very special. The work we did to create a documents-based course on the structure of European society 1000–1500 provided me with the context for much of my later work on poverty and women.

² J. C. Holt, *The University of Reading: the first fifty years*

She is to be counted among a number of women medievalists who distinguished the British academic scene (such as Dorothy Whitelock, Eileen Power, May McKisack Margaret Deansley), in the early – middle decades of the twentieth century. They were strong, career focussed individuals. A couple of them went for marriage but not maternity–there was no expectation that one could have it all. They all had a hard ride to get where they did and the story of their success belongs very properly in both the history of education and the history of women.

Whilst Sir Frank Stenton was an Anglo-Saxon scholar his wife was a specialist in the Normans. Their scholarship was rigorous, resting on a disciplined familiarity with documents – Plea Rolls, Pipe Rolls and Charters. By the standards of our times it does not make easy reading. A blip in Lady Stenton's document based career however emerged at the end of her career in the form of a study entitled *The English Woman in History* (1964). The breadth of this work–it extends into at least the late nineteenth century – as well as its very structure, were quite at odds with anything Lady Stenton had written before. Her former student and my colleague in the History department, Barbara Dodwell, said she did not regard this as a 'serious' work and she herself wrote a kind of apologia for her book in the introduction. She described it as a 'holiday' endeavour that she and her husband and friends shared by combing secondhand bookshops and indulging her interest in Christmas and birthday presents.³

Yet the collection of books which now form part of the Stenton Library at Reading can hardly be dismissed as trivia. The reading informing her work was very extensive and the end product could not be described as light. Indeed, in the late seventies when I put together an optional subject on the history of women in the early modern period which in the fullness of time developed into *The Prospect before Her* (1999) the Stenton collection was an invaluable resource. So why might Lady Stenton have adopted a version of the practice of the eighteenth and nineteenth century woman novelist in suggesting that what she offered was not quite up to the sterner stuff of real history?

My guess, substantiated I would argue by the very form of the work, is that she was very conscious that her own agenda in putting this work together differed considerably from her approach to her other scholastic endeavours. I would suggest that she, at the end of her career, experienced a longing akin to that which surfaced amongst a younger group of women historians in the

Beauvoir at the very moment she was writing, was pronouncing on the absence of a women's past and the degree to which this impacted upon a woman's development of a sense of self.⁴ Historians contemporary to Lady Stenton such as Eileen Power and Margaret Deansley had found space in their work for abbesses and religious women. Moreover, Sir Frank Stenton himself, had written an essay on Anglo-Saxon women in place names, a piece of scholarship pivotal to Lady Stenton's argument in the early chapters of her book.⁵ But she wanted to go beyond the specificities of rock-face scholarship to the broad interpretative mode, one which began with the Anglo-Saxons and terminated with the breaching of Oxbridge by clever girls. Lady Stenton, it would seem apparent, was intent on creating a narrative account which allegedly offered a past to all Englishwomen. Taking some broad aspects of experiences taking place in England over a thousand years she concocted an evolving personage or set of personages with shared attributes able to deem

The Germans felt that in their women was something holy which made them able to look into the future and they scorned neither to consult them nor to follow their advice. The peoples of whom Tacitus wrote lived some four hundred years before the Angles and the Saxons made any settlements in Britain, but they were the stock from which the first Englishwomen sprang.⁸

Lady Stenton was not the only writer who drew on the descriptions of Tacitus. Indeed, long before her Engels saw these Germanic women as exploiters of the land and equal to their menfolk until capitalism in the form of ownership of property made them a historical anachronism by destroying *Muttersrecht*. Lady Stenton went further, however. She urged that such women were not afraid or unable to plead their case in court. They did not need men to speak for them. She describes them as ‘masterful’.⁹ They were not excluded from the law where their honour was to a degree protected. From this high-point they were doomed to setback with the arrival of the Normans who brought with them Roman and worse, feudal, law designed to structure a military state of fighting men. In this legal structure women were disadvantaged in the inheritance of property because the land was accorded by the monarchy against military service. Heiresses must be married to those who could perform such services and families to protect themselves used marriage to cement kin-group alliances. A married woman’s legal status was subsumed in that of her husband and hence she could not hence speak in court in her own defense. For Lady Stenton, change in this gloomy situation was gradual receiving impetus from the presence of Queen Elizabeth I and the spread of literacy. Literacy and knowledge were the way forward. Education was the key to change.

Much of the work concerns the rise of the learned lady although the countrywoman who was farm manager is duly acknowledged. Lady Stenton admires the women writers of the eighteenth century but is not entirely comfortable with Mary Wollstonecraft whose ideas are lauded but way of going about things is condemned. Indeed, she has a certain impatience with a rights’ discourse. Perhaps Harriet Martineau is the woman who commands most of her respect.¹⁰ The expansion of the availability of education in the nineteenth century is critical to her theme because such an initiative makes possible the realisation of the self. Education for women is more significant than the suffrage and indeed Lady Stenton discontinues her narrative before votes for women are achieved on the grounds that far too many books have already been written on this theme already.¹¹

Some have endorsed, some have criticised her chronology and some have shown a similar dismissal of political rights for women. Virginia Woolf, for example, thought the suffrage of much less importance than a room of one’s own or a small personal income. Clearly a lot depended upon who one was. The Anglo-Saxons, after all, practised slavery whilst the Normans did not and

those whose ancestors' arrival in Britain was via the Irish boat in the nineteenth century or those whose ambitions could only have meaning after the Education Act of 1870 might feel their historical roots had been passed over.¹² When the black feminist Belle Hooks asked who was washing Betty Friedan's floor when she was writing her critical work of feminist criticism, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she tersely summarised the destruction that considerations of class and race can reek upon generalisations about a category as

*lives? What were the implications for women of industrial change?*¹³ Lady Stenton too had a clear problematic. *How does the law, the legal and cultural framework, impinge upon women's lives?*

These two examples, of women who long predate the concerns of the sixties with women's history, also illustrate the degree to which historians, products of their times, had, in spite of the absence of women from the university curricula, the desire to secure for themselves a past. Anyone old enough to remember the history syllabuses of the sixties is only too cognisant of the remorseless masculinity of the record. From Stubbs' Charters to World War II a medieval abbess (Hilda of Whitby), Elizabeth and Mary Tudor, Catherine de Medici. Marie Antoinette *en passant*, and Queen Victoria might alone represent the female of the species. When the Civil Rights movement of the sixties burst in America and inequalities based on gender and race became

vaunting of a single method over another. There was, after all, no available archival source labelled 'Women in ...'

For the professional historian in academe one had to start by reviewing terrain which was to a degree familiar and thinking about where women, variously defined might intrude upon the record. Probably the first bibliography for an actual teaching course in women's history was drawn up in 1971 by Natalie Davis and Jill Conway at the University of Toronto. A bibliography is not a neutral commodity. One had to start with works in print (amongst them Stenton and Alice Clark). Clark's work provided an early thesis for development and indeed some of her theses seemed set in stone. Two interpretations of early modern history however dominated the sixties and shaped to some degree the discussions. The first was inspired by the socio-economic questions about property and capital relationships posed by Marx and had to be somewhat reformulated to recognise that the working class was not necessarily monolithic in its experiences and that women could be doubly disadvantaged in the workplace. Some, like Edward Thompson were remarkably open to the idea. Others were averse to the suggestion that early socialism, in particular, demonstrated its own form of sex discrimination. The structures of union meetings and goals of a family wage for the working man rather than a concern to address the earning differential as between men and women or open up more skilled jobs to female labour showed socialism as a contributor to sexual inequalities. Nevertheless, in Britain, history from below, a concern with survival strategies in which women were deeply concerned, was perhaps the earliest 'home' for a study of women in the past. In France the dominant reading of history was that of the Annales school who were

it of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety?¹⁵

There was however, more than one approach to family history. In the 1970s Lawrence Stone produced a highly influential work aimed at uncovering the affective relationships of the English family from the middle ages to the nineteenth century.¹⁶ This ambitious project was based on an examination and analysis of extant letters, journals and autobiographical writing and even more upon predicative literature which poured from the printing presses of Europe over this period. Stone came up with a chronology which cut the early modern period into segments. His English lineage family, characterised by the subservience of the individual to family interests was a sixteenth and early seventeenth century phenomenon. It was a gloomy experience. Parents arranged the marriages of their children with no respect for affection let alone anything we would recognise as love. The baby and very young child were, given heavy infantile mortality rates, something that parents were wary of making any emotional investment in. Put out to nurse, swaddled to restrict its movements, harshly disciplined as the repository of sin as it grew older, and dressed in the uncomfortable replicas of adult garments, the infant was taught to understand duty but not encouraged to indulge in what we would think of as childish pleasures. Stone saw a softening of attitudes once civil war had receded and urged that the real changes came in the eighteenth century ‘the century of the child’ and for him, Britain led the changes.¹⁷ Secularisation toned down the gloom of predicative pronouncement: enlightenment discourse undermined the gloominess of clerical exhortation, peace allowed families to relax more and sustained prosperity and a burst in consumerism led to house building and spending. The child was recognised as someone whose mind and body demanded special care. His mind should be developed by an education which allowed him to question and experiment. Toys and books should capture his imagination. Naturally his affective relationships changed. Men and women fell in love! Dynasticism was a less overarching consideration.

This interpretation did not go uncriticised and for good reasons. Stone was accused of mistaking predication for real life. His use of journals and letters was shown to be eclectic. Linda Pollock detailed the references to child beating in all known British and American ego documents and found it to be never used in respect of girls and almost never in the case of boys.¹⁸ Alan Macfarlane discerned affectionate middle class families in the sixteenth century but stuck

ill remunerated work in other people's homes had always produced single mothers and would continue to do so. But they left largely untouched Shorter's observations on the quality of early modern motherhood. Indeed several feminist authors (sociologists and philosophers rather than historians) used his bleak generalisations to further a thesis that mothering was a cultural production and in no way 'natural' to the female of the species. Instead it was an attribute which was imparted during the socialisation of the young girl through nineteenth century educational programs and the filter down effect of bourgeois norms. The developing and intrusive state interested in cannon fodder and an abundant force of young people to populate the colonies fostered notions of improved maternity through education and example.²³ Two widely influential texts, Elizabeth Badinter *The Myth of Motherhood* (1980) and Nancy Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1975) proved very acceptable in the short term. Badinter, a philosopher, claimed the evidence for maternal indifference in the early modern period can be deduced from the practise of wet nursing and the high levels of babies abandoned as foundlings in the first days of life. Capitalism with its demands for child labour then altered the value of the child within the family. Mothers had a new interest in seeing their infants lived. The state which promoted capitalist development promoted mothering which was not an innate instinct in women. Furthermore the promotion of consumer goods directed at children helped to define caring motherhood. Chodorow, a sociologist, argued that nineteenth century motherhood was reproduced in the home itself. Parents and particularly mothers shaped their girl children so that they did not react against imposed limitations on job expectations and wages and accepted as 'natural' the view that they were destined for motherhood. Mothers in short reproduced their own disadvantaged lives for their daughters.

A more positive view of historic motherhood was slow to shape itself. Indeed, one could speak of a consensus of silence. When it was treated, it was

either the wealthy or the commercial classes. The first used wetnurses for cultural reasons. Country women were considered to be better milk producers than the aristocracy and the country was considered healthier than the town. Families where the habitation was also a site of commercial production (the best studied case is that of the silk workers of Lyons) were also ill-equipped to have a baby on the premises. They used a wet nurse for economic reasons.²⁶ The mother could not relinquish her role in the family economy. In short, indifferent motherhood was difficult to argue from such sources. More positively, the visual imagery of the past has left considerable testimony to mothercare. Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, a study of a part of Europe which does not seem to have made much use of wetnurses, used the works of Dou, ter Borch and Steen etc as well as literature such as the work of Jacob Katz – and midwives' accounts to construct a very different rendering of the caring mother. But we have had to wait for more balanced accounts of motherhood as a fulfilling role, one which entailed a lot of commitment and which could be rendered harsh or impossible by external circumstances. Indeed, in this process, Italian historiography has demonstrated considerable precocity. Motherhood has been seen as a positive transmission agent of culture (language, sentiments).²⁷ In Britain Anna Davin's recent *Growing Up Poor* (1986) represents a positive breach with the spirit of much of the historiography of the seventies in its profoundly sensitive treatment of maternity in the context of poverty.

In the late seventies and eighties history began in fits and starts to undergo a reshaping of focus. Whereas the Annales school and a Marxist historiographical tradition had been dominated by the socio-economic and by structures, cultural history involving both literary (language) and anthropological influences (rituals and orderings) became increasingly important. In this process and an influential force were the developments which marked the transition of women's to gender history. Briefly this development reflin

interest they raised in the form of physical deprivation. Nevertheless the pre-occupation with women's spirituality at all levels was an important constituent

Of recent years, the history of the court has been a growth industry in European historiography perhaps because it has offered such richness of evidence and a diversity of approaches. Politics, dynastic struggles, have been joined by ritual and ceremony as a means of reading through the visual signs how relationships of power and degree were acted out. Historical anthropology has asked us to think about the body of the king and that of the queen. Autobiography, letters and journals have been used to convey experiences of the individual within the wider court culture. The significance of the gift economy within the court as a key to patronage and rewards and favours: the structures of patronage and access to it: the study of networks emanating from families and kingroups are all preoccupations which have burgeoned in recent years. Indeed, the study of court culture is almost a microcosm of much of the historical focus of our times.

It is worth considering the many uses to which the memoirs of the Duc de Saint Simon of the court of Louis XIV have been put over the last half century. Having been the source behind Norbert Elias's *The Civilising Process* (English trans. □□□□), a work which was concerned with the means by which a court culture has a filter down effect on manners and comportment, the work has served gender historians well in permitting an analysis of the careers of differing types of women within the court.³⁸ Peter Burke drew upon the work to examine the relationships between ritual and power and most recently Le Roy Ladurie and Filou sought to use the work to explore *le système de la cour* to include networks and hierarchies of power, art as propaganda and even age structures and mortality rates of male and female courtiers – amongst other issues.³⁹

A great deal of innovative work on the early modern court has come out of Italy perhaps because of the precocious flowering of court culture in that context. Some of the best works on the functioning of the gendered court have come from Maria Antonietta Visceglia and Renata Ago using the papal court, one of the most developed courts of Europe, one employing and attracting the largest number of ambassadors and where rewards and pickings existed on a truly international scale. Ago's works pursue the dynamics of negotiating favours drawing on the evidence of family papers which permit the construction of an entire process of solicitation to gain posts which would enhance the career of family members first to secure the cardinalate and then to acquire ambassadorial posts and offices which would build up revenues.⁴⁰ Marriage negotiations were carried out in not dissimilar ways resulting in the exchange of a large percentage of family wealth to buy the right marriage for a daughter, right defined by the standing of the prospective husband's family. An important aspect of Ago's work, and she is not alone, is to pursue the respective roles of the women and men of the family in the process of negotiation.

³⁸ A. Muhlstein, *Les femmes et le pouvoir: une relecture de Saint Simon* (Paris, □□□□).

³⁹ E. L. Ladurie & J. F. Filou, *Saint Simon ou le système de la cour* (Paris, □□□□).

⁴⁰ R. Ago *Carriere e clientele nella Roma barocca* (Rome, □□□□). The exchanges of gifts and favours between intermediary groups of people to gain a certain end form part of a 'baroque economy,' Ibid., *L'Economia barocca* (Rome, □□□□).

increasingly isolated at court. A prime example of such isolation and hostility was of course Marie Antoinette who has received considerable academic attention in recent years.⁴³ Marie Antoinette *l'Autrichienne* (the last syllables spelling out the word bitch) was the embodiment of an unsatisfactory , indeed politically disastrous, alliance between Austria and France which soon turned sour. From the moment of her arrival in France she was bombarded with letters from her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, commenting both on her conduct and comportment and the political significance of the Franco-Austrian alliance. Regina Schulte recently pointed out the Austrian Empress's obsession with receiving portraits of the Queen in her regalia as Queen of France. The exhibiting of such works at the Habsburg court reminded ambassadors of the connections of Austria (whose devise bore the words *tu felice Ate*

Thus Madame de la Vallière was summarily despatched to a Carmelite convent when Louis XIV's eyes turned elsewhere to Madame de Montespan whose days were also limited. But amongst the king's mistresses whose reign was more protracted were first the Princesse de Soubise, whose consenting husband profited much from his wife's favoured status and Madame de Maintenon who turned her position into that of private wife (she was secretly married to the king but never wore the crown). Maintenon's success was due less to her sexuality than her loyalty and trustworthiness, attributes which an aging king with increasing infirmity rather than rampant virility found precious.

Interestingly, both the Princesse de Soubise and Maintenon earned the respect and friendship of the king whilst acting as royal governesses. To date this is a somewhat underestimated role in court studies. Royal children frequently lost their mother or she was absent or engaged on royal business. Under such circumstances the governess who supervised the physical care of the royal children and taught them etiquette, gave them their early religious formation and determined their contacts, could build up considerable influence over her royal charges. A conspicuous example outside France is Isabel de Mascareñas, governess both to the children of Charles V and also for some time to the children of Philip II. Mascareñas's charges were initially the future Philip II and his sisters Maria who subsequently married Archduke Maximilian and later became Empress and Juana who became Queen of Portugal but was soon widowed. In later life the sisters joined Mascareñas in Madrid where they were conspicuously influential in promoting Jesuit activity in Spain. Indeed they put up the money for the foundation of the college, later known as the Colegio Imperiale, since Maria, who donated the most money and had the most prestigious title, was made official founder. Juana herself became a covert Jesuit. It was, however, the close friendship between Loyola and the royal governess which set the process in train.

The hierarchies of royals and office holders who enjoyed a specific role in ceremonial were only a small proportion of the court population. Whereas the first were on permanent display – whether they liked this or not – there was a more shifting population of great families who came to court with a specific aim in view, the promotion of dynastic interests. Renate Ago argued that four sets of people (the two families which had produced the husband and the two that produced the wife) could identify a given reward – a benefice, a pension, an office in the donation of the ruler – and each contribute something to the furtherance of the goal. This 'team game'¹⁴⁵ accords different rules to men and women. Most of those for whom favours are sought are men and most of those who can accord favours are men. However, the role of women is to beat a path for the men of the family, to open up channels of communication, sow ideas, write letters to find out who else can help, before the men of the family put are sought arc

The supplicant wants some guarantee of a favourable response. Women can set matters *en marche* because, themselves lacking formal legal status, ..., they can only act at the informal level and hence test the likely reception of a proposal. The very informality of their conversations at the dinner table, in the powder room, in the corridors behind a fan or sitting in an assembly, permits them to drop an idea, let it mature to discover whether it is going to get very far, before the men, for whom negotiation is honour, move in. Women specialise in networking and letter writing. They arrange dinner parties and can place the invitees. If their town houses offer an advantageous viewing spot for a procession they can invite selected people and foster contacts. They operate a gift economy quite different from that of men in which food, livestock, cheese and wine, needlework, particularly gloves, puppies of a fashionable breed raised on their estates, figure conspicuously. They can be offered, where appropriate, to either men or women who can help their cause. Barbara Harris' study of the Henrician court offers an exact parallel to the gift economy operated by women in the papal court.⁴⁶ The goal can be short or long term such as a position in a high noble household which itself could lead to important contacts for an advantageous marriage; or a more immediate ambassadorial post opening up because of the turn of international events. The goal in sight, however, the formal negotiations are left to the menfolk.

Widows, however, conscious that the services performed by their late husbands should not be forgotten and their children passed over in the distribution of honours, could make a periodic pilgrimage to court. Saint Simon, for example, gives his unstinting approval to the widow of Louvois who came annually to Versailles with such an end in view. Some came as well to promote the interests of their sons or daughters in the marriage market. The business of circulating information about the size of a dowry (always exaggerated) and the potential input of the husband's family was frequently left to women so that by the time a head of house proposed negotiations he knew roughly the scale of the enterprise with which he was dealing. A court wedding was a very expensive undertaking but it served to establish the family of origin of both contracting parties on a scale of social status.

When a country was ruled by a queen the dynamic of favours fell still more conspicuously into the hands of women since the ear of the queen could be reached through her ladies in waiting who hence had direct access to the top.

Though the position of lady in waiting at the courts of Elizabeth I or Queen Anne was not in itself well remunerated, gains were to be had through the gifts of those who wished to solicit favours of the queen. Elizabeth I in particular would enquire of her women what monetary gifts they been given for their approach to her and only if she considered the gifts in proportion to the favour asked would she concede it.⁴⁷

This brief commentary upon trends in court studies has omitted a great deal such as the study of letters and autobiographies or the roles of women

⁴⁶ B. Harris, 'Women and Politics in early Tudor England' *Historical Journal* 11 (1970).

⁴⁷ C. Mertens in conversation with the author, Cambridge, 1994.

and men in ritual and ceremony. It has, however, been intended to demonstrate how an eye for gendered roles has enriched our understanding of the dynamic of the court and how it has helped to construct an appreciation of the whole through the interaction of specific roles. I would certainly not claim that other kinds of historical endeavour will not carry our understanding of the court still further. Indeed, as I write this double negative I am reminded of the frequency with which ex students of this university from the late sixties allude when they meet me and we succumb to the pleasures of memory, to a lecture given by Angus Mackay. Angus, a tri-lingual scholar of great wit and learning specialised in a lecture delivery which usually did not involve notes and certainly, because I don't think they had been invented, transparencies with bullet points, was concerned to expand on the Valois court and on the political vagaries of the disastrous reign of Henri III. He speculated that a significant figure in the court of this bi-sexual monarch was probably the barber who picked up in the course of his business information casually revealed by his clients the 'mignons' (pretty boys) which the barber might trade to others. How much evidence he offered for this I do not know but several students commented that it helped them to understand how politics in a very different structure might operate and how 'the barber's story' might indeed inform the whole history of this particular court.

History has traveled along some unexpected roads since the Stentons chiselled their careers in medieval English history. Time will tell what will grip the interest of generations to come. But diversity, after all, is what the writing of history is about and those who in the future track historiographical development will, I have no doubt, be obliged to recognise that the pursuit of women in the past, in which Lady Stenton was precociously involved, led history into a brave new world of enquiry.

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