

## Women in European Culture and Society: Gender, Skill and Identity from 1700

**Review Number:**

1117

**Publish date:**

Monday, 1 August, 2011

**Author:**

Deborah Simonton

**ISBN:**

9780415213073

**Date of Publication:**

2010

**Price:**

£75.00

**Pages:**

432pp.

**Publisher:**

Routledge

**Place of Publication:**

Abingdon

**Reviewer:**

Eve Colpus

Deborah Simonton's *Women in European Culture and Society: Gender, Skill and Identity from 1700* purports a 'straightforward agenda – to explore European women's relationship to their culture and society since about 1700' (p. 1). Aimed at university students and lecturers, the book delivers a survey history of European women's experiences and representations, which provides useful thematic synopses of regional similarities and differences in the domains of women's familial relationships, working life and broader political culture. Its utility value as an original historiographical contribution is variable – for instance, it is particularly good on German women and work 1945–2000, and more broadly it offers important comparisons between rural and urban life. Overall, its strengths are as a teaching and learning aid into the variety of European women's experiences, providing another response to Joan Wallach Scott's 1999 appeal to 'interrogate the production of the category "woman" itself as a historical or political event whose circumstances and effects are the object of analysis'.<sup>(1)</sup> Through a determination to extend the field of modern European women's history from its overwhelming focus on Britain, France and Germany, *Women in European Culture and Society* succeeds in bringing together insights into the historical condition of women in central, northern, southern and eastern Europe.

The book is a product of Simonton's long-standing interest in the history of modern European women, first illustrated over 15 years ago in her earlier book *A History of European Women's Work: 1700 to the Present*.<sup>(2)</sup> It also emerges from a resurgence of interest in modern European women's history in the last decade which has resulted in a plethora of publications comparing women's experiences in two or more countries. A non-exhaustive list of these texts includes Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga, *Gendering European History, 1780–1920*

, Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789–1918*, Gisela Bock's *Women in European History* (covering the Middle Ages to the twentieth century), Fiona Montgomery and Christine Collette's edited collection *The European Women's History Reader*, Mary S. Hartman's *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past*, Rachel G. Fuchs and Victoria E. Thompson's *Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Mary Jo Maynes, Birgitte Sjøland, and Christina Benninghaus' edited collection *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750–1960*, and Ann Taylor Allen's *Women in Twentieth-Century Europe*.<sup>(3)</sup> Simonton herself edited a collection of essays entitled *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700*.<sup>(4)</sup> These interventions reveal the sustained impetus behind academic surveys of modern European women's history, which first emerged in the 1970s. With the exception of some sincere attempts at synthesis and comprehension (notably, Bonnie G. Smith's *Changing Lives: Women in European History Since 1700*, Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser's *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* and Olwen Hufton's *The Prospect Before Her: a History of Women in Western Europe. Volume One 1500-1800*)<sup>(5)</sup>, these studies have focused on the diversity and nuances of women's expectations and obligations. In the last decade, scholars have self-consciously sought to write histories which move beyond a national framework to confront the challenges of studying modern European women across both time and space.

Simonton aims in *Women in European Culture and Society* to contest the 'grand narrative' of women's experiences in the past. In particular, she seeks to complicate accounts of bourgeois femininity and industrialisation and privileged periodisations, especially the predominant focus on the 'Victorian' period (p. 3). These are long-established subjects of critique amongst historians of women and gender, and Simonton brings together a wide-ranging discussion to present her challenge. Drawing out the similarities between, and diversity within, women's life and work-paths, she orientates her discussion around the spheres of 'family, commerce, industry, ideology, politics and cultural expression' (p. 3). For a text aimed at undergraduate students of European history and women's history, and postgraduate students of gender scholarship, these foci have the benefit of moving discussion fluidly across the conceptual (and physical) arenas of the public and private and personal and political. Simonton offers a clear and sustained contestation of the 'separate spheres' school of gender history. She also illustrates the non-linear development of women's political and social progressions. Her discussion of 18th-century townswomen's community engagement outlines the sheer scale of economic citizenship (or 'civil business') some women had in the print trade, to hospitality services via textiles) long before political enfranchisement (pp. 73–8). While the much asserted emphasis on the professionalisation and politicisation of 20th-century Western society is complicated by statistics such as in the 1980s, fewer than a quarter of Italian, Dutch and Irish wives worked outside the home (p. 321).

Simonton is more successful in problematising established meta-narratives of women's history than she is in her other core aim to write a 'transnational history' of modern European women. The transnational lens promises to offer historians of women and gender a prism through which to develop two key areas: firstly, to dismantle the fixity of social and cultural boundaries; and secondly, a fresh angle from which to reconsider the multi-directional relationships between and across different social groups. As Patricia Clavin argues, transnational history 'is motivated by the desire to highlight the importance of connections and transfers across boundaries at the sub- or supra- state level, the composition of categories, and the character and exploitation of boundaries'.<sup>(6)</sup> *Women in European Culture and Society* does achieve its aim to transcend national preoccupations through its sustained consideration of local, national and regional differences in women's experiences and worldviews. However, in sympathy with other recent additions to the literature on modern European women, Simonton's history is rooted in a comparative perspective. Whilst she transcends national preoccupations, Simonton nevertheless continues to accept national borders and boundaries as given. This perspective leads to a focus on common themes rather than a genuinely connective approach, which could open up new avenues of inquiry into the connections and networks of actors who underpin the stories that Simonton compares.

*Women in European Culture and Society* is structured in three sections covering respectively the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Each section is divided into three chapters, which in turn offer histories at the levels of

the individual, local community and the 'wider world'. Each chapter is introduced by a prelude which discusses key aspects of political thought as they impacted upon women's experiences (*l'ancien regime* and 'the rights of man' discussion, the inheritance of Enlightenment thought and 20th-century political regime change). Simonton 'separate[s]' these sections by two 'intermezzos', which explore the Revolutionary era (from c. 1790 to the 1850s) and *la belle époque*, charting the period c. 1880–1914. This elaborate structure interweaves women's history both into a long *durée* and moments of particularly urgent social and cultural change. It also succeeds in making good Simonton's claim to blur chronological boundaries and 'overlap' stories, whilst at the same time engaging with familiar patterns of periodisation which 'facilitates students' use of the book and helps to align it with other histories' (p. 3). Simonton's main objective, therefore, is not simply to write women's history as 'herstory', but rather to locate the variety of the conditions and circumstances of women's lives in the past within and alongside existing dominant narratives of modern European history, in the process challenging historiographical orthodoxies about nationalism and national identity. This echoes her 'Introduction' to *The Routledge History of Women in Europe* (7), where she argued that 'Writing women into European history directly confronts a number of ideas about what constitutes Europe, how its history is written and how this history relates to the emerging meta-narratives of global or world history' (p. 1). *Women in European Culture and Society* makes a determined bid to situate women as agents of change and cultural producers, as well as discussing their representations. Read as part of a survey course on modern European history, it could provide insights into the 'intimacies' of women's lives from childhood to marital life, the varied spheres of women's work, and the elaboration of female citizenship.

Anecdotal evidence from Simonton's wide-ranging reading brings together a vast range of famous and unsung extraordinary and ordinary women. Her discussion of the philosophy of women's rights developed in the 1790s (in the first intermezzo) is an excellent example of banking up evidence across various regions to demonstrate a long-established commonplace in women's history beyond the existing canon. Readers encounter Briton Mary Wollstonecraft alongside the less well-known (certainly within a British historiography) Germans Amalia Holst and Emile Berlepsch – each of whom promoted civil equalities between men and women in subtly different terms (p. 119). Simonton is also good at uncovering exceptional women who have been understudied, like Sophie Germain (who worked under the pseudonym Le Blanc), who investigated the vibration and elasticity of surfaces which eventually contributed to the erection of the Eiffel tower (p. 109). As important as these notable women are the many ordinary women and women writing about everyday situations who Simonton unveils. Heart-rending 18th-century correspondence from Lady Jerningham to her daughter on her marriage ('I lose you the best of daughters, the most amiable Companion, the best friend I had the best placed confidence in...', p. 42) contrasts with the 1950s Vacluse schoolgirl's matter-of-fact overview of her mother's daily obligations (p. 331). Taken together, these examples point to the emotional and intimate facets of women's everyday lives about which historians still have much to understand.

A particularly useful addition to the book is the series of timelines of key events and issues that append each prelude and intermezzo. These chronologies are a key tool through which Simonton provides students simultaneously with an overview of women's history and a narrative about women's experiences over time that fits alongside other histories of modern Europe. They provide readers with a good level of detail which can be layered over other chronologies of political, economic and social events. Moreover, many of the milestones and achievements that Simonton flags up could themselves be developed as dissertation topics for undergraduate or masters students. Intriguing entries, such as the reference to Eleanor Coade, who in 1770 developed a formula with her daughter for artificial stone, but died without revealing its composition, are surely worth pursuing. Additionally, for instance, the timeline for 'Modern times' has two entries for 1963 which ask for exploration: the ratification of the International Labor Organisation's Equal Wage Convention, and the story behind Soviet Lieutenant Colonel Valentina Tereshchova's achievement (in June of that year) as the first woman in space.

A long-standing and important aim of women's history (beyond making women visible) is to make women's articulations of their experiences part of the historical record. Simonton situates her work firmly within this goal, writing that 'Where possible, this book relies on women's own voices to articulate how they saw their

worlds and their places within it' (p. 5). Women's voices permeate *Women in European Culture and Society*, transcending geographical region, class and generation (and sometimes in comparison with men's). However, the breadth of the book's thematic coverage occasionally hampers the degree to which readers might get a sense of the personality of individual speakers, or a chance to locate their expressions within the wider social and emotional parameters of a life story. Inadvertently, Simonton underlines this limitation in the rich case-study of Milja Tamm, with which she chooses to open the prelude to 'Modern times'. Tamm, Simonton relays, was born in May 1918 on the island of Hiiumaa in Estonia. After completing high school in Tallinn in 1937, she was a private tutor and then teacher on the island of her birth. During the Second World War, Milja negotiated governmental changes and movements for new jobs (including a sideways move into journalism), as well as the constant threat of German soldiers on Hiiumaa. She also lost touch with her fiancé Villem at this time, who was deported to Siberia. Following family tragedies (like the disappearance of her brother-in-law), Milja was arrested in February 1946 and sent to Siberia for nine years of forced labour. On her return, she married Villem (whom she had not seen for 17 years), and gave birth to twins. She became a secretary when her children were school age, and worked for the rest of her life until she retired in 1972 (pp. 265–6). Tamm's story (which Simonton extracts from the collection *Carrying Linda's Stones: An Anthology of Estonian Women's Life Stories* (8)) is an example of where Simonton might have developed the methodological benefits of writing history from a perspective that moves from the specific to the general. In engaging closely with the minutiae of Tamm's biography, the reader gets a sense of the complex overlays of hardships, achievements and experiences that made up this woman's life. Simonton is almost apologetic for deploying this example, claiming that 'the specific conditions and influences of individual women's lives were different, and perhaps she [Tamm] was not typical', but nevertheless that Tamm's 'life illustrates the vagaries and rapidity of political change' experienced by a broad demographic of women in the 20th century (p. 266). Questions of uniqueness and representativeness, however, are not the most relevant framework here. It would have been more interesting (and historically rewarding) if Simonton explored the relationship between the social, cultural and subjective layers of history. Tamm's biography cries out for such treatment.

Telling the story of a group of inhabitants of a political or territorial unit is usually inevitably freighted by the author's own geographical and cultural perspective. Karen Offen recently observed the limitations of the primary material used in comparative histories of modern European women by scholars who are typically mono- or bi-lingual.(9) Although Simonton relies heavily on English language secondary material, she does draw on secondary sources published in other languages (she includes eight non-English texts in the further reading bibliography, predominantly in German and French, but also Swedish). She also discusses some non-English published primary sources, including fiction, journals, and treatises. It is surprising, then, that she omits references to some very valuable tools that are widely available for students and researchers of European women's history in other languages. It is nearly 30 years since Joyce Duncan Falk wrote about the emerging online bibliographies in women's European history.(10) Since then, online database collections have been steadily growing, with notable examples including Aletta (International Archives for the Women's Movement) from the Netherlands, KVINNSAM (Kvinnohistoriska samlingarna, Centre for Studies in Women's History) from Sweden, and GenderInn (Women's and Gender Studies Database) from Germany. The FRAGEN database (launched in 2011) of texts pertaining to the development of second-wave European feminism throughout the 27 EU countries plus Croatia and Turkey, is searchable via country, author, keywords and thematic overviews. Using these materials does demand language skills of students and researchers, but the unexplored terrains which they promise to reveal is an incentive to engage in the interdisciplinary agenda of women's history through a multilingual lens.

In part because *Women in European Culture and Society* is aimed at the current and next generation of women's and gender history students and students of survey courses on modern European history, it would have been good to see Simonton adopt a more challenging conceptual line. Capturing the nuances and diversity of women's experiences, and the complex relationship between continuity and change, remain central and important intellectual challenges posed by women's and gender history. Simonton signals her engagement with these challenges throughout the book, and at one moment in the resonant phrase, 'new wine, old bottles' (p 197). However, there is a place for women's history today to be pushing the conceptual

and methodological boundaries even further. New wine and old bottles can only take the project of women's history as far as the definition of those terms allows. A more radical transnational framework would not only have had the benefit of highlighting the blurred cultural edges of particular European women's experiences, it could also have enabled Simonton to develop the signposts she lays to emotional history in order to explore the forms of relationship through which women inhabited and negotiated modernising culture and society. Simonton's text might have been even more creative and exciting had she moved beyond conceptualisations of new and old and sought to smash the stereotypes and the bottle altogether.

## Notes

1. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (Rev. ed., New York, 1999), pp. 206–7.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work: 1700 to the Present* (London, 1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga, *Gendering European History, 1780–1920* (London, 2000); Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789–1918* (London, 2002); Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (Oxford, 2002) (covering the Middle Ages to the 20th century); *The European Women's History Reader*, ed. Fiona Montgomery and Christine Collette (London, 2002); Mary S. Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (New York, NY, 2004); Rachel G. Fuchs and Victoria E. Thompson, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke, 2005); *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750–1960*, ed. Mary Jo Maynes, Birgitte Søland, and Christina Benninghaus (Bloomington, IN, 2005); Ann Taylor Allen, *Women in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke, 2008).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700*, ed. Deborah Simonton (London, 2006).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Bonnie G. Smith, *Changing Lives: Women in European History Since 1700* (London, 1989), Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* (London, 1988; 2000) and Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: a History of Women in Western Europe. Volume One 1500–1800* (London, 1995).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Patricia Clavin, 'Time, manner, place: writing modern European history in global, transnational and international contexts', *European History Quarterly* 40, 624 (2010), 625.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *The Routledge History of Women*, ed. Simonton.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *Carrying Linda's Stones: An Anthology of Estonian Women's Life Stories*, edited by Suzanne Stiver Lie, Lydna Malik, Ilvi Joe-Cannon and Ruth Hinrikus (Talinn, 2006).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Karen Offen, 'Surveying European women's history since the Millennium: a comparative review', *Journal of Women's History*, 22, 1 (2010), 155.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Joyce Duncan Falk, 'The new technology for research in European women's history: "online" bibliographies', *Signs*, 9, 1 (1983), 120–33.[Back to \(10\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Historical Association

[http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general\\_resource\\_4398\\_73.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general_resource_4398_73.html) [2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1117>

### Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7757>

[2] [http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general\\_resource\\_4398\\_73.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/general_resource_4398_73.html)