

The Cooke Sisters: Education, Piety and Politics in Early Modern England

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Gemma Allen's well-conceived and meticulously researched first book explores the ways in which themes of education, piety and politics interacted and impacted on the lives of the Cooke sisters in late 16th-century England. These particular women are, as the introduction clearly sets out, worthy of their first book-length study; not only were all five given an unusual and thorough humanist education by their enlightened father, Anthony Cooke, but all married men of significant political weight, most notably Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and her Treasurer, Sir Nicholas Bacon. Allen makes a strong case for the historiographical gap she seeks to fill. While specific aspects of either their education, their religious networks or their political influence have received a modicum of scholarly attention, no existing work has sought to examine these women's entire experience.⁽¹⁾ By doing so, this study therefore builds on the seminal work of Barbara Harris, who redefined 'the political' to allow the integration of women into broadly conceived political narratives during the late medieval and early Tudor period.⁽²⁾ Allen's work extends this approach across the rest of the 16th century. The particular pull of Allen's work is that it not only reconstructs the sisters' lifelong education, but integrates this with their political careers as the wives of important statesmen in order to ask what practical advantage a humanist education could have for aristocratic women during this period. Usually examined only in relation to royal women of this period, Allen argues that education presented 'a way in which individual women could negotiate the patriarchal restrictions placed upon them by early modern society' (p. 10). As such this study not only underlines the relevance of noblewomen to our understanding of early modern politics, but adds to the ongoing discussion

concerning the nature and exercise of patriarchal rule during this period.

A broad source-base is used throughout and is a major strength of this work. The Cooke sisters are generally known for their translations and original writings in English and classical languages. While Allen naturally plumbs these texts, offering new contexts and interpretations, she also delves into letters, portrait and tomb iconography, church registers, and household accounts, many of which are found among less well-known collections or in local record offices. This combination of what might be termed 'literary' sources alongside more traditional historical sources should be applauded. Archival recovery work of this nature is always difficult and time-consuming but this is particularly the case when the subjects are female, since gender bias through the ages means that finding aids are rarely geared towards this purpose. Allen's work in this respect is impressive, and – encouragingly – suggests there may well be considerably more material to be mined for the study of early modern women.

The nature of the source material has, Allen tells us, strongly informed the structure and remit of the book. The capricious survival of her sources means that while there were five Cooke sisters, substantial material exists only for two, or perhaps three at a push. The book is therefore necessarily weighted towards those two and Allen has sensibly placed the emphasis not on biographical concerns, but on the themes which appear most often: education, piety, and politics, and combinations thereof. Nevertheless, by uncovering unknown or unexplored aspects of these women's lives, the book does perform valuable biographical service and is a useful addition to the necessary work of fleshing out the female characters of this period. Allen is also able to engage in considerable 'myth-busting' for the Cooke sisters; for instance, she is able to disabuse readers of the oft-repeated illusion that the sisters' father, Anthony Cooke, was tutor to Edward VI and that Anne, the eldest sister, assisted him in this. Instead, Allen suggests that Cooke was probably one of Edward's 'readers' after the retirement of Richard Cox in 1550, and there is no evidence of Anne's involvement (p. 1).

Chapter one of six is concerned with the reconstruction of practical aspects of the sisters' education in order to add to our knowledge of early modern reading practices, and contextualise this against prescription. To this end it comprises analysis of relevant prescriptive texts, a reconstruction of their libraries, and consideration of the relationship between their particular learning and the traditional *studia humanitatis*. There are daunting methodological issues here but they are frankly appraised; while it is extraordinarily difficult to reconstruct the reading of a married woman, since her books usually become subsumed into her husband's library, the habitual use of complementary sources allows Allen to show that the Cookes' reading general went far beyond even that prescribed for royal women. The way that the sisters' individual ownership marks are used to shed light on their marital relationships is a fascinating example of this study's contribution to the study of early modern female lifecycles. The comparison of the Cookes' education with that of their typical male contemporaries is instructive; but though comparisons are made with Lady Jane Grey and Princess Elizabeth, little indication is given of the normality or otherwise of the Cooke sisters' experience in this regard.

Chapter two moves onto 'the power of the word', focusing on the Cookes' own writing in the form of translations, verse compositions, and drama. The chapter is centred around a quote from Elizabeth Cooke-Hoby-Russell: 'Quod licuit feci, vellum mihi plura licere' (I have done what was allowed, I wish more were allowed of me) but in apparent contention with this statement, Allen argues that their achievements were in fact considerable despite the limitations generally placed on women's expression in the public arena, and that their classical education was the vehicle for these achievements. Close reading of their literary outputs forms the bulk of this chapter and there is much re-dating and re-contextualising which is of undoubted value to literary historians or scholars of early modern print culture. Allen is rightly firm in her assertion that translation functioned both as a literary work in its own right, and provided opportunities for these women to voice their opinions.

Chapters three, four and five move onto more prosaic employments and take female counsel, political networks, and religious networks as their respective foci. Chapter three argues that the sisters' humanist education gave them greater scope to offer advice, and thus added an extra dimension to their letters of petition. However, Allen is careful to note that this did not necessarily translate into concrete success, either

in terms of gaining patronage or a positive response to often-unwanted advice; what it may have done was help to 'improve the odds' (p. 116). Chapter four builds on the examination of the Cooke sisters' interactions with those around them by considering their political networks, and the role they played within them. Using terminology derived from Sharon Kettering's seminal work on early modern patronage (though this is not included in the bibliography), Allen analyses the Cooke sisters' roles as 'brokers' of patronage on behalf of their politically influential husbands.⁽³⁾ There is clear scope here for further work on women's role in diplomacy. The sub-section – all chapters are helpfully sub-sectioned in this way – on the female intermediary and family networks is particularly noteworthy, as it provides fascinating evidence that these women were able to choose whether or not to support suits of patronage from family members; the idea of 'obligation' was apparently conceived more loosely than many studies suggest. It would be interesting to hear more of Allen's views on the rationale behind these decisions. The uncovering of Elizabeth's involvement in high politics, namely as an intermediary between the Cecil and Essex circles during the 1590s, is a textbook example of the reasons for studying noblewomen; it provides a new angle onto well-known high political events.

Chapter five on religious networks is equally instructive. It follows recent scholarship in arguing that while the Cooke sisters are understood as generically 'Puritan', Puritan beliefs actually 'encompassed a wide spectrum of opinion' (p. 167). Given the prominence of religion in the sisters' lives – a view bolstered by this chapter – a reconstruction of their religious networks is a valuable addition to the book, and has been undertaken with characteristic thoroughness. Allen notes that while it may seem anachronistic to consider political and religious networks separately, the lives of the Cooke sisters warrant this treatment. Anne, for instance, was apparently happy to engage in religious patronage, but shied away from explicitly 'political' activity – a distinction which might be worthy of more detailed exploration in light of the book's self-proclaimed use of Barbara Harris's more inclusive definition of 'the political'. The complexity of family networks for women is particularly well illustrated here, showing that the sisters could work with, but also in opposition to, each other or their husbands.

The final chapter concerns responses to the Cooke sisters in light of their education, arguing that they were praised by contemporaries for their scholarship not as a reaction to their exclusion from politics, but because it enabled them to become more involved as intermediaries than might otherwise have been the case. This chapter is especially strong on the importance of lifecycle to the sisters, highlighting the problems widowhood caused for Elizabeth and Anne. It also argues that further work is needed on the boundaries between public and private for women during this period.

The book is concerned throughout not simply to reconstruct the sisters' experience of education, but to ask what use it had in their daily lives, and concludes that while it did not necessarily make them more successful in their fields of influence, it created more opportunity for success through public and private expression. While comparison is drawn with 'women' in a general sense throughout, I suspect the book may have benefited from more direct comparisons with specific women of similar status, as one is left with the question of the Cooke sisters' collective uniqueness – and therefore their value to other scholars within the field. If their education made them particularly unusual, as the book seems to suggest, is this accomplished interweaving of education and politics condemned to remain an isolated, unrepeatable scholarly endeavour? Similarly if the sisters were so unique, should readers hesitate to use them to illustrate the more general experience of early modern women? This perhaps suggests that the field requires a more general study of the education of aristocratic women during this period, if such a thing is possible.

Though Allen carefully emphasises the thematic value of her work above its biographical impact, it was at times difficult to keep the sisters disentangled and the reader may struggle to come away with a clear sense of their individuality. Though this is in many ways an unavoidable difficulty with prosopographical work, I wonder if judicious adjectives might have been employed to give a greater sense of their different characters, which would in turn have helped to maintain biographical continuity between the well-conceived thematic chapters. It would also be extremely interesting – though perhaps not possible given the surviving source material – to see an exploration of the Cooke sisters' own feelings towards and thoughts about their education, its uses or disadvantages in their various milieus. Elizabeth's statement that she had done what

was allowed, but wished she could have done more, is a fascinating insight into women's own conception of the limitations placed upon them; but Allen does not speculate as to what Elizabeth meant by this. What more did she want to do? Did any of the sisters feel that their education had disadvantaged them in the eyes of their contemporaries; did they wish they could be contented with less; did they resent the fact that it did not appear to open as many doors as it did for men?

Something the book does particularly well is continue to break down the barrier between what is perceived as 'public' or 'private' during this period, not only for women but in a general sense. It is made clear, as is increasingly the case in this field, that these women took public roles, and that they were not only expected to do so but lauded for their successes in the political arena. It should be emphasised that they were not alone, though the book makes a good case for their particular circumstances granting them entry into certain arenas, notably diplomacy, which may have remained closed to other women. This book not only adds to our knowledge of early modern women's experience, but brings together the adjacent historiographies of female education, piety, and political roles. Allen achieves her well-defined aims, and her work is a valuable addition to the field of early modern history.

Notes

1. See, for instance, P. Croft, 'Mildred, Lady Burghley: the matriarch', in *Patronage, Culture and Power: The Early Cecils*, ed. P. Croft (London, 2001), pp. 283–300.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. B. J. Harris, 'Women and politics in early Tudor England', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), 259–81.
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York, NY, and Oxford, 1986).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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