

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Namier in Petticoats?

Review Number:

63

Publish date:

Monday, 1 February, 1999

Author:

K. D. Reynolds

ISBN:

9780198207276

Date of Publication:

1998

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

272pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Publisher url:

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780198207276.do>

Place of Publication:

New York

Reviewer:

Peter Mandler

Diana Spencer has a lot to answer for: suddenly, women of the landowning classes are back in vogue, possibly for the first time since the 1920s, when everyone from Virginia Woolf to Ramsay MacDonald seemed to love a lady. In academic circles, where Diana carries comparatively little weight, a more plausible trend-setter might be Stella Tillyard's *Aristocrats* (1994). But the thicket of recent academic works on landed ladies since the 18th century has deeper roots: consider Pat Jalland's *Women, Marriage and Politics, 1860-1914* (1986), Judith Lewis's *In the Family Way: Childbearing in the British Aristocracy* (1986), Pamela Horn's *Ladies of the Manor* (1991), Jessica Gerard's *Country House Life* (1994), two works on women as gatekeepers of High Society (Michael Curtin's *Propriety and Position* [1987] and Marjorie Morgan's *Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774-1858* [1994]), as well as the weight given to upper-class women in influential books like Frank Prochaska's *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (1980) - something of a trailblazer - and Linda Colley's *Britons* (1992). Since *Aristocrats*, we have had the coincident work of the two Amandas (Foreman's *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* and Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter* [both 1998]), articles and forthcoming monographs on aristocratic women in 18th century politics by Elaine Chalus and Judith Lewis, and two forthcoming collections of essays on elite women in modern British politics, one edited by Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (*The Power of the*

Petticoat, the fruits of a stimulating conference of the same name at Warwick in May 1998), the other by Amanda Vickery (*Women, Privilege and Power*, the fruits of a two-year project under the auspices of the Center for the History of Freedom at Washington University in St. Louis, including chapters on aristocratic women by Chalus, Lewis and Mandler). And this is to leave out of account altogether the burgeoning Anne Lister industry, devoted to mining the extraordinary diaries of that early nineteenth-century landowner, boroughmonger and lesbian.

The obvious historiographical explanation for this eruption - one hinted at by Kim Reynolds in her own valuable contribution to the recent literature - is that modern historians have had until recently too many ideological hang-ups to appreciate the treasures awaiting them in this field. Aristocratic women had insufficient (or, rather, no) connection with labour history or the origins of socialism or the origins of feminism - the subjects principally responsible for motivating research in modern women's history; nor did they seem to be typical enough to feature in social historians' accounts of sexuality, family structure or the family economy. Reynolds also makes the more debatable suggestion that the political significance of aristocratic women can only be appreciated by looking backwards to the familial politics of the unreformed era - elements of which linger into the late nineteenth century - thus further distracting the interest of modern historians obsessed with progress and change. Only as these ideological blinkers have fallen away have modern historians come to appreciate - what early modern and medieval specialists have long understood - that in the archives of landed families can be found some of the best-documented and most articulate accounts of women's lives in all of British history.

So determined is Reynolds not to fall into the orthodoxy of "sisterhood" - an orthodoxy that sees women's identity as constituted principally by their gender (and thus a site for oppression and/or liberation) - that she has written a book which almost perversely underplays the salience of gender in women's lives and asserts instead the centrality of class. Aristocratic society, she argues, was well-bounded and internally solidaristic, especially in Victorian circumstances where it came increasingly under attack from without. This internal cohesion - combined with the aristocracy's traditional preoccupation with the family as the vehicle of dynastic power and continuity - blurred gender divisions that may have split other classes into "separate spheres". Of course aristocratic women had roles differentiated from and, on the whole, subordinated to those of aristocratic men; but dynastic responsibilities brought them much closer to men than might otherwise have been the case; and here Reynolds usefully employs the anthropologist's notion of the "incorporated wife", who plays a subordinated but still integral role in the family project. Since the British aristocracy as a whole retained more political power and more public presence than any other aristocracy in nineteenth-century Europe, the "incorporated" aristocratic woman remained in the "public" sphere to an unusual degree in a period when women of other classes were allegedly being confined to a "domestic" or "private" sphere. These assumptions form the backdrop to Reynolds's survey of aristocratic women's public functions in Victorian Britain, which embraces both the local level (estate leadership, churches, schools, charity, electioneering) and the national (electioneering again, salons and the royal household). In fact these assumptions form not only the backdrop but also the foundation, for they set the parameters of the Ph.D. research on which this book is based: women of the high aristocracy only are considered (to demarcate a class with fully public and national roles from the "mere" gentry, more localized and private); the women in question are predominantly Whig and Liberal (because Whig-Liberal governments were in power for most of the period in question, 1830-80); the principal sources are collections of women's private papers (though oddly only those in public hands); and little attempt has been made to cover the papers of aristocratic men (even where these include letters from aristocratic women), because aristocratic society was a partnership (here the assumption intrudes); women's papers alone can show women "at the centre...of aristocratic life...not acting in an isolated, gender-specific sphere, but in association and co-operation with the men of their class" (24). These self-limitations make for a satisfyingly tight piece of research, and an impressively economical and readable book, but they do introduce biases, discussed below, and leave open the possibility of a more definitive book on aristocratic women and politics yet to come (not from me, I hasten to add).

It is a curious - and, possibly, historiographically significant - feature of Reynolds' work, as also the work of Elaine Chalus, that the investigation of women's role in high politics seems to necessitate a resuscitation of

the Namierite world-view. That is to say, high politics is considered as an informal, familial and dynastic business of competition for power, place and patronage, relatively insulated from ideology (including religion), popular politics and social change. The most original and thought-provoking parts of Reynolds' book are those that capitalize on this Namierism to explore long-neglected aspects of Victorian political life. Thus we are indebted to her for a unique survey of the personnel, functions and political influence of the ladies of Queen Victoria's Court. She devotes comparatively little space to the two crises of 1839 - the Bedchamber Crisis (for which she refers the reader to an unpublished paper of her own) and the Flora Hastings Affair (which gets only a footnote) - but as compensation she gives a completely novel insight into Court politics during Victoria's post-Albertine "seclusion" and then into the role of the Court in fossilizing the Queen's anti-Gladstonian prejudices in the final decades. Equally fascinating is her chapter on "party" politics, which takes up the role of political hostesses in greasing the gears of high-political machination. Here the Namierite perspective is quite explicit, and persuasive, gently detaching aristocratic hostesses from "the beginning of a tradition of civic feminism" where they had been awkwardly placed in some earlier treatments and restoring them to "the end of a long tradition of aristocratic government". The case is made that, at the top of the political tree, a few hostesses organized social-cum-political gatherings that played a role later to be taken over by more formal party structures. For this reader the highpoint of the book was the imaginatively detailed reconstruction of the choreography of such entertainments at pages 164-71.

Of course Reynolds grants that this role could only be played by a select few women, and that these few tended to be highly heterodox: Lady Holland a divorcée (to whom pious men could not introduce their wives), Lady Palmerston a swinger, Lady Molesworth a singer, Lady Waldegrave a singer's daughter and a Jew to boot. More women participated in the eminently Namierite activity of soliciting votes and influence for Parliamentary elections. Especially when managing estate influence for a minor heir, aristocratic women could wield considerable power in the normal course of unreformed or semi-reformed political life. Further down the scale, even more women could and did dispense religious patronage, religious and educational philanthropy, poor relief and household and estate employment, though these functions seem to interest Reynolds less, as less public and more the business of the "mere" gentry than the grandees that are her proper subject. Here again Reynolds' contribution is strongest where the existing historiography is weakest - see her discussion of church patronage, and especially the thorny problems of Scottish church patronage - but conversely her contribution is weaker in areas of existing strengths - personal religion is treated almost wholly as a matter of institutional affiliation rather than as a potentially transfiguring belief system.

Even the most diehard Namierite must accept, however, that the aristocratic hold upon informal political power was, at least, weakening over the Victorian period. How does Reynolds cope with this fact? Overall she chooses to ignore it, holding that "the central concerns of aristocratic life" remained "the enhancement of family prestige, influence, and economic strength; the maintenance of a hierarchical, paternalist society; the exercise of patronage; and the government of the country" (25). She acknowledges some evidence of changing values in the society at large and even within the aristocracy - a brief mid-century fashion for personal religion, for instance, which in a few cases led to withdrawal from more public political roles - but on the whole she is resistant to suggestions that aristocratic behaviour changed because it had to, under pressure from a changing world of which the aristocracy was an integral part. Aristocratic women dispensed philanthropy because they had always done so, not because it was newly fashionable or offered novel outlets for female activity; their devotion to local schools and churches stemmed from landed paternalism pure and simple. Indeed, Reynolds speculates, aristocratic women might have clung more fiercely than their men to the informal privileges of the old landed hierarchy as they had "more to lose by the widening of the franchise and the weakening of the aristocratic hegemony" (143).

What if, however, the aristocratic response to social and political change was more flexible, responsive, even creative? By essentializing "the central concerns of aristocratic life" in this way, and yoking women to them more firmly than men, Reynolds seems to me to be missing out some of the more significant developments in Victorian aristocratic culture - and particularly in the lives of aristocratic women. The Namierite world she depicts undoubtedly exists, but it is not the whole world, and is in part an artefact of her research strategy. Consideration of men's correspondence reveals a heightened sensitivity to the fragility of the

Namierite world - and to women's place within it - in a political atmosphere drenched with anti-aristocratic and anti-corruption rhetoric. This sensitivity yielded an impressive range of adaptive strategies. The persistence of aristocratic power in the nineteenth century upon which Reynolds insists was not, that is to say, made possible simply by carrying on in eighteenth-century ways.

Let me illustrate this point by reference to a possibly trivial episode to which Reynolds nevertheless devotes a page and a half. In the North Staffordshire election of 1847 the Duchess of Sutherland appeared to use the influence of her absent husband on behalf of his nephew Lord Brackley, though Brackley proved to be a Peelite and the Sutherlands were loyal Whigs. For this she was reprimanded by Lord John Russell, the Whig party leader, and the Sutherland influence was re-directed firmly away from Brackley. In Reynolds' version, based (she says) on the "correspondence concerning the election which remains", the episode demonstrates the continuing power of influence, a woman's ability to choose to use it, and a Duchess's right to appeal to the top (the party leader) rather than a minor official - even if, in the end, she lost her case. But there are other possible interpretations (and many other possible sources unused by Reynolds: in private collections of women's papers, in public collections of men's papers, in the press, even in correspondence between men contiguous in the archive to the letters between the Duchess and Russell that she does employ). The 1847 election was marked by growing concern among Whig party leaders that ducal influence be used more sparingly and tactfully in an increasingly liberal political environment. The Duchess's intervention was the subject of unflattering comment in broadsides and newspapers, drawing unnecessary attention. Here was an opportunity to translate the problem of aristocratic influence into the age-old language of misogyny - an opportunity duly seized by Russell's brother, the Duke of Bedford: "these are the set of mistakes made by women, who act from impulse, and do not see the consequences of their actions". Bedford and others did think that "a male relative or proxy" would have been preferable to the duchess, contrary to Reynolds's supposition. She is right to say that the episode illustrates the continuing use of aristocratic influence, which I would have thought beyond dispute; but it also illustrates the growing anxiety about aristocratic influence - among aristocrats - in a form that disadvantaged women. The same anxiety disadvantaged Whig political hostesses.

More important, however, is Reynolds' unwillingness to acknowledge anxieties about aristocratic influence in forms that advantaged women, were indeed pioneered by women. To see this requires more concern for aristocratic women as women, who did share qualities and tendencies with women of other classes. Take personal religion: it could be argued that aristocratic women's leadership in matters of personal religion was a crucial factor in facilitating their class's transition from the Namierite world of influence and privilege to the Victorian world of right conduct and character. There is plentiful evidence in aristocratic women's correspondence with their sons and husbands that they saw men's conversion to new standards of religion and morality as their special mission, as aristocrats and as women.

This mission took public as well as private forms: organized philanthropy, the foundation of women's educational institutions, religious and pretty frankly political campaigning (such as Harriet Sutherland's abolitionism). Some of these activities Reynolds does discuss, giving particularly good coverage to "Aunt Harriet's Cabin", but viewing them as class rather than as gender phenomena; others she discounts (Henrietta Stanley's extensive educational activities merit only passing mention and no examination); others she neglects altogether (Amelia Murray and Queen's College, Harley Street; Lady Noel Byron's many philanthropies, "excluded from this study" because too "professional"). She rejects Frank Prochaska's suggestion that by means of organized philanthropy aristocratic women, like their middle-class counterparts, sought to widen the permissible sphere of women's political activity; she considers that aristocratic women already had a wide enough sphere. But what if aristocratic women calculated that the moral, philanthropic sphere was one in which their class had a future, while the Namierite sphere of influence was not? And what might be the far wider-reaching political implications of a private mission among aristocratic women to modernize their men's image by reining in fleshly profligacies, enforcing the taking of communion, and ultimately cultivating Christian virtues? In this connection, it seems significant that, though some attention is paid to Leonore Davidoff's arguments about the socializing functions of Society hostesses, Reynolds does not mention or cite the more recent arguments by Curtin and Morgan which focus on the moral-policing

aspects of Society, I imagine because her narrow definition of politics excludes them.

I have chosen to take vigorous exception to aspects of Reynolds's argument, but that has only been possible because Reynolds has been brave enough to advance an argument sufficiently strong and clear to provoke scrutiny and thought (not by any means a universal feature of books based on Ph.D. theses). Apart from making a signal contribution to the mounting literature on elite women in modern history, her book may grow in significance if Namierism is to make an unlooked-for comeback in the study of political history: not impossible as the de-ideologization of politics carries on apace. But my guess is that Reynolds' book will be best read as part of the story of elite women alongside complementary versions from the likes of Morgan, Lewis, Vickery and Prochaska who favour more gender and more ideology in the class-gender-ideology mix.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/63>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/393>