



Kathryn Gleadle, Sarah Richardson, eds. *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. xii + 179 pp. Â£14.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-77141-9.

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Gendering British Political History

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Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson have produced a book which will be widely welcomed by teachers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women's history as well as by researchers in the field. *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860* brings together several of the most important recent threads of scholarship in this field. It also extends them, so that it seems that we are finally beginning to uncover a much more rounded picture of how women participated in politics in this period before the emergence of a coherent, organized women's movement, and, therefore, a much fuller understanding of the political process itself. Most of the eight authors represented in this collection push beyond the famous women whose involvement in politics can easily be dismissed as exceptional to lesser known women of the social elite and even, in some cases, to women much further down the social scale.

The editors begin the volume with an introduction that expands on the concept of the 'petticoat in politics' in this period and all that the use of the term implied. It defends a wide definition of politics, acknowledging recent work by other scholars which has begun to take this approach in investigating the political roles of women. The substantive chapters begin and end with considerations of electoral politics, Elaine Chalus writing about the eighteenth century and Matthew Cragoe examining the period 1832-68. These chapters dovetail fascinatingly, both historians making particular use of the

hitherto largely neglected source of the evidence taken by the House of Commons select committees scrutinising contested elections. Chalus builds on her earlier work on female canvassing, and goes on to investigate the electoral privileges that some women held under the different types of borough franchise before 1835, and Cragoe investigates canvassing books for the later period. Both show clearly that contemporaries expected women to understand and participate influentially in the electoral process in various ways, from owning voting rights to one or more seats and canvassing for the votes of others, to being canvassed or bribed on their husbands' behalfs, influencing their husbands' votes, and acting as sources of local memory of recent electoral events and long-term electoral practice.

Anne Stott uses Hannah More as a case study to show different ways in which women at the turn of the nineteenth century could contribute to major political debates of the day and, in so doing, offers a more nuanced analysis of More's own politics than is usually presented. Sarah Richardson explores the significance of elite women's networks-family, local, correspondence, political, salon-for their political engagement. She notes that if networks are particularly important for historians investigating women's activities, this is not because networks were an inferior division in the political league: they were a crucial element of politics for men as well. Moreover, they were not just an important arena for women and politics because women were relegated to them in their exclusion from more formal arenas, al-

though that is true, but also because women's interests genuinely lay in these networks.

Clare Midgley and Nadia Valman concentrate on religion as a vehicle for women's politics. Midgley builds on her important work on women's involvement in the campaign for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and beyond by turning to examine their previous participation in the campaign for legislation against the practice of sati in British India, while Valman analyses the different perspectives represented by women writers (novelists and pamphleteers) on the question of Jewish political rights in Britain after Catholic emancipation was granted in 1829. Simon Morgan's essay on the campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws follows these chapters neatly, with his recognition of the important part played by women from nonconformist chapels, but his main interest is in showing the campaign's employment of consumer politics and therefore the high profile it gave to women.

Finally, Kathryn Gleadle offers an important refinement of the historiographical debate over the use of the 'separate spheres' model. In recent years historians have modified and criticized the model of a sharp division between a masculine, public sphere and a feminine, private sphere in the bourgeois, Evangelical, Anglo-American world which emerged at (according to different historians) varying points between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. In general, critics have thought it insufficiently typical of practical reality (as opposed to aspirational ideology) to be very useful to historians. They have increasingly pointed out many ways in which even middle-class women did not conform to its precepts and principles but occupied the public sphere and

engaged with it. The essays in this book provide further and substantial evidence of such activity; yet Gleadle shrewdly refuses to dismiss the concept of 'separate spheres'. To reduce it to mere proscriptive rhetoric, she argues, is to neglect the way in which many different readings of it contributed to women's and men's identities, and a much more nuanced approach is therefore required from historians. For example, as she goes on to show, the Unitarian Saint-Simonian and Fourierist radicals of the 1830s were both feminists and espousers of a version of 'separate spheres'. They may have interpreted what those spheres entailed differently from those who were more conservative but they none the less maintained difference of function and activity.

One would, of course, still like to know a great deal more about British women's political activities and attitudes in this period. For one thing, this book is very largely about English women, despite its title, and a great deal more research needs to be invested in, for instance, Scottish women in the same period (at the very least to explain why they were less politically active, if such is the case, than their counterparts south of the border). But the contributors to this collection have made a very strong case that women's participation in the political process in England, far from being an unusual or exceptional event, was 'widely acknowledged [if] highly contested' (p.8), and even sometimes invited and expected. The same could, of course, be said of non-elite men in this period.

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