

## Review Essay

---

Beatrice Moring and Richard Wall. *Widows in European Economy and Society 1600–1920*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2017. xiii+327 pp. ISBN 978-1-78237-177-1, £75.00 (cloth).

---

*Widows in European Economy and Society 1600–1920* opens with a brief sketch of the career of Barbe-Nicole Cliquot, née Ponsardin, better known as *la Veuve Cliquot*, and her portrait decorates the cover. This is a reminder of the extent to which the (roughly) last 20 years of historical research on the situation and activity of widows has proceeded in dialogue with new approaches to business history, as the history of the family firm has become an important meeting-ground for gender and economic historians. This book is neither quite the comprehensive survey or synthesis of European research in these connected fields (or even in “widow studies” as such) that readers might be hoping for at this juncture, nor does it have a great deal to say about widows as businesswomen. Nevertheless, it provides a welcome and reliable guide to key themes and findings about the conditions for widows’ economic agency.

The “European society and economy” of the title signals a narrative that focuses on material relations; there is no reference (for example) to recent research in cultural practices or the history of emotions. The authors’ decision not to discuss “the views of other people on widows, stated or unstated” (8), or to give too much attention to explaining the circumstances that are revealed in the evidence, is very refreshing, although there are places where the social historian could wish that more respect had been shown to the material power of institutionalized ideologies (as in the brief reference to notion of the “deserving poor” [21]) or to the sphere of politics in which widows, like others, acted to defend their material interests. There is a geographical bias toward Britain and Northern Europe (particularly the Nordic countries), reflecting the primary research interests of the authors, although they do draw effectively on scholarship and published data from Italy, France, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands. In terms of chronology, the center of gravity is in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is in keeping not only with the focus of much recent research but also with the particular conceptual and empirical challenges posed by the transition to social and economic

---

© The Author 2017. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Business History Conference.

modernity (proceeding at different rates in different regions), which Beatrice Moring (who completed the manuscript following the death of her partner and coauthor Richard Wall) highlights in her introduction: the emergence of the ideal-type of the nuclear family with a male breadwinner meant that widows as economic subjects disappeared from the view of contemporaries and historians alike. In consequence, research that acknowledged their ubiquity and sought to understand how they lived has faced real empirical challenges at the same time as it has often called for a revisioning of the past. This is what makes the field exciting, and the stated purpose of this book is to demonstrate that widows in the European past were indeed more than passive victims.

Seven substantive chapters follow Moring's outline introduction. Chapter 1 introduces the theme of widows and poverty, making a strong case for the proposition that at all times and in all places poverty was a function of social status and age rather than of marital status—for women as for men. It also offers an overview of the ways in which poor widows were provided for through indoor and outdoor relief, or provided for themselves. Chapter 2 discusses women, legislation, and property; relatively brief, it is essentially an introductory overview of the variety of European legal regimes and serves as a preface to the subsequent chapters in which aspects of widows' property are explored in greater depth. The third chapter, entitled "Assessing the Assets of the Widow," examines the evidence that nominative sources such as wills, inventories, and tax rolls provide for widows' property ownership, and offers among other things a very useful guide to the uses and challenges of such sources. A fourth chapter addresses various kinds of contractual arrangements for guaranteeing widows' subsistence and social security, including usufruct, life interest, pensions, and similar arrangements. The focus here is very much on the forms of contract rather than their consequences for widows' economic activity; in particular, the opportunity to incorporate the evidence for widows' investment practices (beyond the brief discussion in Chapter 3 of their involvement in moneylending) is unaccountably missed here. In the subsequent chapter, a focus on urban widows allows for exploration of their role as earners in trades and services, with three pages devoted to businesswomen. The demography of widowhood is the topic of Chapter 6, while Chapter 7 sets out what is known about household structure, age, social status, and geography. Among other things, the evidence analyzed there brings home the point that the image of the widow as relatively old and living alone reflects a late twentieth-century reality rather than that of any earlier period. The volume includes fourteen well-selected illustrations and sixty-seven tables, as well as twenty-one pages

of appendices containing qualitative and quantitative material on aspects of widows' lives over the period. Most of the illustrations and statistical data and all of the material in the appendices are drawn from English, Welsh, and Scandinavian sources. The very full critical apparatus provides an excellent guide to international research in the field.

Eve Rosenhaft

University of Liverpool

E-mail: dan85@liverpool.ac.uk

doi:10.1017/eso.2017.58

Published online November 20, 2017