

## Book Reviews

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Maria Ågren, *Domestic Secrets: Women and Property in Sweden, 1600–1857*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. 304. \$65.00 (ISBN 978-0-807-83320-9).  
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Every now and again a reviewer gets to read a book that cannot but be highly lauded and recommended. Maria Ågren's *Domestic Secrets* is such research. This does not necessarily make the writing of the review any easier, but it certainly makes it a much more pleasurable undertaking.

Maria Ågren explores what happened to a wife's inherited property during marriage, whether or not it became incorporated into the joint estate, administered rather freely by the husband during marriage. She also investigates the theory and reality of female inheritance rights in early modern Sweden. She argues persuasively that a fundamental tension between the protection of inherited land or lineage property—which according to old Swedish ideology remained within the family—and the necessities of the credit market arose.

An enduring feature of Swedish property law was the special position of inherited family land. Its owners could not freely cede it because the closest relatives had the right to redeem the land if alienated without their consent—just like the French *retrait lignager*. This right (*bördsrätt*) motivated people to keep track of even very remote kinship ties, occasionally resulting in complicated inheritance disputes or redemption suits. Spouses were free to donate, will, or cede chattel or acquired land, but not inherited land. Only under exceptional circumstances could it be sold outside the family. Because of their pending rights to married women's land as potential heirs, their closest kinsmen retained an interest in monitoring how husbands managed uxorial property during marriage.

Maria Ågren delves into the nexus of protection of family landownership, spousal property, and the credit market. She shows persuasively that whether the Swedish legal system chose to prioritize the interests of family landownership or the credit market was debated already in the seventeenth century. There was a to-ing and fro-ing between individual rights and collective interests. That a wife's inherited land should be protected from spousal mismanagement or debtors for her benefit and that of her kin group was a long-lived notion.

Demographic factors also contributed. The high mortality rates of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century facilitated female access to land. However, this development was reversed in the course of the eighteenth century. When women were increasingly bought out of their inherited portions of land, they lost some of their protection in widowhood. Growing female proletarianization ensued. Ågren also discusses eighteenth-century trials by newspaper, when parties involved in lawsuits published their family scandals and private domestic property arrangements as a means of influencing public opinion in their favor.

*Domestic Secrets* is a disciplined and lucidly written book. Yet, in my opinion, a slightly wider legal historical context for the Swedish development would have benefited it. This would have been possible without sacrificing or compromising its strengths.

Early modern Swedish widows were made to swear that they had not concealed any property belonging to their husbands' estate. Widows ceded their rights to communal property by ritually surrendering their keys (symbol of their management of the household) to the court and thus escaped all responsibility for the husband's debts. Some couples even made antenuptial marriage contracts freeing the wife from all future liability for her husband's debts. Perhaps some attention could have been given to these practices?

In addition, Ågren's shift of focus in the book could have been better explained to the reader. In the beginning, the ordinary Swedish peasant is in the foreground. This is quite justifiable. Around 1600, the population of Sweden had a total population of about 1.2 million inhabitants, over 95 percent of whom were farmers. Land was by far the most important economic resource in the country. However, later in the book the focus shifts more towards the nobility and bourgeoisie. Why not discuss these groups earlier?

Ågren does not discuss the campaign of the Swedish nobility to limit the access of noblewomen to landed property by suggesting that their inheritance lots and morning gifts be paid in cash and chattels, not land. How does this fact fit the picture painted by Ågren? As this noble policy manifested itself already in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, it probably had nothing to do with the exigencies of a burgeoning credit market. Rather, it represents a shift in noble aims and ideologies. She also fails to discuss her subject in connection with the larger trends of growing patriarchal control in seventeenth-century family law.

For me, Ågren's calmly argued and rigorous work evokes many novel thoughts and comparative questions—and it inspires new research. This is undoubtedly a sign of an innovative and inspiring book.

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