INTRODUCTION:

A Monstrous Regiment of Women?

Elizabeth Ewan and Maureen M. Meikle

This book is not about Mary Queen of Scots. Much — and, some believe, too much — has been written on her already. It is ironic that in a country with one of the most famous female historical figures in the world, little has been written on other women. Mary’s bête noire, John Knox, wrote passionately about the ‘Monstrous Regiment of Women’. Knox was referring to the ‘regiment’ or rule of queens such as Mary’s mother, Mary of Guise. This book is about the ‘regiment’ or group of Scottish women c.1100–c.1750, few of whom occupy a prominent role in existing histories of Scotland. We hope that this collection of essays will go some way towards making such women more visible in Scottish history and encourage others to undertake more research into their lives.

When Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O’Dowd co-edited a very interesting collection of essays on early modern Irishwomen it prompted Scottish comparisons. In spite of the destruction of the National Archives in 1922, the contributors to the Irish volume were able to begin restoring early modern women to their rightful place in history. Reading through these papers, one could only wonder about women in medieval and early modern Scotland. They had received little attention from historians, yet Scottish sources are undoubtedly richer for the period 1100–1750. Independently from each other, Elizabeth Ewan and Maureen Meikle were thinking that it would be a good idea to produce a Scottish version of MacCurtain and O’Dowd, ideally launched with a one-day conference in Edinburgh. Both had a teaching and research interest in women’s history and wanted to know more about Scotswomen from all social strata. It was time to challenge some existing Scottish historians to think ‘gender’ and stop them belittling women’s role in Scotland’s medieval and early modern past. Dauvit Broun gave us our first opportunity to voice these opinions in review articles for The Innes Review.

From the outset, Women in Scotland c.1100–c.1750 was an international project as Maureen was in Missouri, U.S.A and shortly afterwards moved to Sunderland, England, whilst Elizabeth works in Guelph, Canada. Early in 1995 Ruth Grant and Sharon Adams agreed to be the local contacts for a one-day conference as they were both postgraduate students in the Department of Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh. The conference was held in May 1996. The Scottish Women’s History Network were happy to co-sponsor the event with the Depart-
ment of Scottish History. One hundred and forty people attended the conference to hear nine very interesting papers with lively discussion sessions. Interest was widespread, with speakers and delegates from several countries.

Participants at the conference were encouraged to submit their papers for consideration in a refereed collection of essays. Other contributions were requested from a wide range of researchers. The book did not seek to encompass all aspects of women's lives from c. 1100 to c. 1750. The sparse coverage of the fourteenth century was unintentional. In the end, with the help of referees, twenty papers were selected and loosely arranged under the themes of religion, literature, legal history, the economy, politics and the family. This book is the result.

Women's history has developed fairly late in Scotland in comparison with other western countries. The reasons for this are complex, but one cause may be the emphasis on Scottish political history in the last fifty years. As the Empire declined, historians in the constituent parts of the British Isles began to focus more on the history of their own countries, separate from that of the United Kingdom. In Scotland, this development was furthered by the disappointment of the 1979 referendum on devolution with its promise of political change. Paradoxically this led to a renaissance of other aspects of Scottish identity, including music, literature, art and history. Because the focus was on identity, political history took pride of place, especially for the period before 1707 when Scotland still had its own parliament.

The social history that has occupied such a prominent place in the historiography of many countries since the 1960s and 1970s did not enjoy the same growth in Scotland. This was in spite of the pioneering efforts of historians such as Harry Graham, Eunice Murray, and Christopher Smout, whose landmark History of the Scottish People 1560–1830 appeared in 1969. Social history emphasised the stories of those beyond the elite who occupied centre stage in traditional histories. Combined with new questions and issues arising from the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, this led to a new interest in women's past. In Scotland, however, few addressed the topic, with the exception of Rosalind Marshall whose doctoral research on Anne Duchess of Hamilton resulted in The Days of Duchess Anne in 1973, and Elspeth King whose pioneering look at the Scottish women's suffrage movement appeared in 1978.

In the early 1980s two major works appeared which advanced our understanding of Scotswomen. Christina Larner's classic study of the Scottish witch-hunt, Enemies of God (1981), raised many fascinating questions about the role of gender in the witch-hunt and the position of women in early modern Scotland. Some of her theories such as the
‘criminalization of women’ after 1560 and ‘witch-hunting as woman-hunting’ are still very influential on historians writing today. Rosalind Marshall’s important survey *Virgins and Viragos: A History of Women in Scotland 1080–1980* (1983), was a novel attempt to look at women from medieval to modern times. Reflecting the material available in largely printed records and her own research, she had to focus mainly on elite women, but her work raised awareness that Scottish women had also played a role in the nation’s history.

A series of demographic studies, stimulated by Flinn’s *Population History of Scotland* (1977), began to lay the groundwork for studies of population and family in the 1980s and these shed further light on women’s lives. The works of Ian Whyte, Rab Houston, Rosalind Mitchison and Leah Leneman, among others, demonstrated the high mobility of rural women, patterns of marriage and female economic activity. Houston and Whyte’s edited collection *Scottish Society 1500–1800* (1989) included an essay giving an overview of women’s economic and social position during this period. Mitchison and Leneman’s *Sexuality and Social Control: Scotland 1680–1780* (1989) examined illegitimacy and irregular marriage, areas which by their very nature involved women.

A turning-point for women’s history in Scotland was marked by the 1990 publication of the essay collection, *The World is Ill-Divided* edited by Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach, followed by their 1992 collection *Out of Bounds.* These two volumes stimulated new research into nineteenth- and twentieth-century women’s history and also raised the possibility of looking at women further back in time. The challenge was met more quickly by modern historians than those working on medieval and early modern Scotland. Nevertheless, in the last two years, monographs focusing on women in the early modern period have appeared, including Elizabeth Sanderson’s pioneering *Women and Work in Eighteenth-century Edinburgh* (1996) and Deborah Symond’s *Weep Not for Me* (1997) on infanticide. Elspeth King has also surveyed the history of Glasgow women from medieval to modern times. A political study of *The Heiresses of Buccleuch,* and a study of women in the 1745 rising, *Damn’ Rebel Bitches,* appeared in 1997. Several articles have appeared in journals, both well-known ones and those not so easily accessible. There are other findings in as yet unpublished doctoral work.

One advantage of the relatively late development of Scottish women’s history is that researchers are able to make use of findings, approaches, and theories developed by scholars in other countries. This exposure to such comparative work is heightened by the tendency of scholars to present papers at international conferences on women’s history as well as at conferences focusing on Scotland. In the last few years papers on
Scottish women before 1750 have been presented at the Leeds and Kalamazoo International Medieval Congresses, Sixteenth-Century Studies Conferences, an Exeter conference on ‘Women, Trade and Business’, and the North American Conference on British Studies amongst others. In Scotland, the first conference on medieval women was held in 1991 by the Scottish Medievalists. Since then, there have been several day-conferences organised by the Scottish Women’s History Network. In 1996 the Edinburgh conference mentioned above was organised as well as an Aberdeen meeting that examined women’s history from both Scottish and international perspectives, and brought together scholars from Scandinavia, Europe, England, Ireland and North America.

There is still a long way to go. General histories of Scotland have little to say about women. Even the most recent collection of primary sources for Scottish history after 1707 has only a few documents on women from the years before 1830 and gender does not appear as a separate category until the section dealing with the later period.24 Literary scholars have been ahead of historians, both in research and in publishing primary sources.25 This led to an embarrassing experience for one of the editors at a 1995 conference session on images of women in medieval Scottish literature. When a speaker asked what was the historical experience of women at this time, she had to reply that we didn’t yet know.

This volume, by presenting a large number of short essays, indicates the great variety of potential topics and approaches. We have intentionally asked for contributions from both younger and more senior researchers, those working specifically on women and those considering them as part of a different project. We have indicated elsewhere some of the directions which future research could take, but we consider the ultimate goal to be a Scottish history where the contributions of both women and men are considered as a matter of course.

Because most historical sources have been written or constructed by men, scholars of women’s history have had to dig deep, range far and wide through a variety of sources, and read between the lines to reconstruct the worlds of women in the past. Many of the essays in this collection demonstrate the value of an interdisciplinary approach. We have purposely not given titles to the different sections, because so many of the papers cross disciplinary and topical boundaries. As well as formal historical records, our contributors have used literary sources, archaeological evidence, sculpture, painting and manuscript illumination, contemporary narrative sources, letters and diaries, oral tradition and folklore.

The collection begins with an examination of women’s piety in the Middle Ages. Andrew McDonald makes use of a great range of sources, archaeological, documentary, architectural and sculptural, to indicate
just how much can be learned about the founders of twelfth- and thirteenth-century female monastic houses, especially those of native aristocratic families. He discusses the role of women in such foundations, a role often hidden by conventional phrasing in legal documents, and suggests how much more can be discovered about these houses by further research in existing documents. He also places Scottish female monasticism from the twelfth century firmly in a European context, while suggesting the survival of earlier Celtic characteristics. His interdisciplinary approach is continued by Audrey-Beth Fitch who uses a similarly wide range of sources to examine the types of messages which late medieval lay women received about their spiritual strengths and weaknesses, especially in the area of sexuality. Again the importance of European influences is brought out, in the devotion to female saints from the Continent. Her paper raises questions about the impact of native female saints and their images on Scottish women.

The images of female piety from the late medieval period can be compared to those from the reformed church after 1560, discussed in David Mullan’s essay. Here the influence of English as well as European Protestant theology on Scottish religious writers is convincingly demonstrated. The gendered nature of theological writing is examined. The negative image of women’s sexuality continues from pre-Reformation days, but there are also more positive characterisations of women’s spiritual strength and piety, reflected in the actions women took to support those ministers who belonged to what they regarded as the true kirk. One wonders if the ministers’ wives discussed in Ian and Kathleen Whyte’s paper were equally supportive of their husbands. Mullan also refers briefly to a fascinating early example of Scottish female writing, the spiritual diary of Mistress Rutherford, of which he will shortly be producing a published version.27

Very little has survived of the words of women from before 1560, but as Priscilla Bawcutt’s and Bridget Henisch’s essay on three of the daughters of James I shows, women did compose poems and other works. Unfortunately, nothing survives of the poetry of Margaret, sent from Scotland at an early age to become the wife of the Dauphin of France. One wonders if her literary talents were encouraged by becoming part of the same court in which the writer Christine de Pizan (mentioned at the beginning of Mullan’s paper) had earned her living. Her sisters Isabel and Eleanor seem to have inherited the Stewart love of books, and Eleanor is an important figure in German literature for her sponsorship or possibly her actual translation of a major work of German literature, *Pontus und Sidonia*. The princesses followed in the European tradition of female patronage of literature.

Moving from the experiences of Scottish women in Europe back to
Scotland, the next two papers examine the content of Scottish poems and songs. Evelyn Newlyn examines the nature of female imagery in male-authored poems in two manuscript collections, the Bannatyne and Maitland Manuscripts, of the sixteenth century. She shows the strong misogynistic tradition that is a noted feature of writing in this period. Again, the concern with the danger of women's sexuality comes to the fore. These male poems can be compared with the songs of Gaelic women examined by Anne Frater. Frater demonstrates how women in their song-writing could both accept and rebel against their inferior status in Gaelic society. The beautiful poetry, here presented in both the Gaelic original and in English translation, brings us the authentic voice of individual women from the period and in some cases provides us with a female reaction to the political events of the day. The subject of women's songs, this time from the work-song tradition, is brought up again in the paper of Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhhart.

The role of women at the Scottish Court is detailed in the papers by Andrea Thomas, Maureen Meikle and Ruth Grant. Interference at the later British Court is noted by Karl von den Steinen. Thomas skilfully depicts both the powerful and the meek at the Scottish Court of James V against the stereotypical poetic background also noted by Newlyn. The comparisons of three queens consort are revealing. Similarly intriguing correspondence between Dame Jean Scott as facutrix to her husband, Sir Thomas Ker of Ferniehirst, and Mary, Queen of Scots is long overdue for exposure. Grant precisely points out the importance of this to national and international politics. Equally revealing are the antics of the countess of Arran, who appears really to have worn the trousers (kilt?) in her marriage to Scotland's one-time political leader. As a powerful woman she was ridiculed and typically accused of witchcraft to try and precipitate her fall from grace. Anna of Denmark, consort of James VI, was both gregarious and shrewd. Meikle has shown that Anna knew well the value of jewels and how to raise money by them. By taking good advice, and acting upon it, Anna nearly brought the royal coffers of Scotland into order during the chaotic 1590s.

According to von den Steinen, a century later elite women were still able to play political gambits. The aristocratic sisters, the duchess of Atholl and the countess of Panmure, involved themselves with politics at a critical time in British history. Against the background of the Darien fiasco, the Union of 1707 and the '15 rebellion these sisters were heavily involved with all the political intrigues of the day, both in Edinburgh and London.

Elizabeth Ewan, Alistair Mann and Helen Dingwall have all looked at different aspects of women's contribution to the economy. All adult women were expected to know how to brew ale. However, the role of the
female brewers in the urban economy, as highlighted by Ewan, is revealing. There were both professional and part-time brewsters supplying a regular demand for household use and for sale. Many were wives, others were servants supplementing their wages. They honed their marketing techniques within a localised area, with shrewd observation of supply and demand. Sadly, this activity was never going to be a high profile business. When the brewing trade became more professional in the sixteenth century, women became marginalised.

Discussion of women involved with the book trade may appear to be incongruous. Nevertheless, Mann clearly shows how women were part of this relatively deregulated craft. Based in the burghs, skilled book women ranged from widows in charge of a publishing house to printers, booksellers and embroiderers of fine book bindings. Agnes Campbell, the royal printer, even had the audacity to publish a counterfeit Bible in 1707, though a more usual female achievement was the embroidered bindings greatly treasured by their elite owners. Although they may have represented only ten per cent of all Scottish book traders, women definitely made their mark in this crafts-based sector of the economy.

Dingwall’s paper proves that women were still a vital part of the economy in the late seventeenth century and had not been relegated to the shadows as the Clark thesis once alleged. Despite changing socio-economic conditions, women’s role in the economy as either unskilled or skilled workers was sustained. Restoration Edinburgh had a greater female than male population — 3,000 of whom were servants. Others were traders, retailers and merchants in their own right, rather than acting for their husbands. Textiles were commonly traded or processed by women and they were known to be moneylenders as well in a pre-banking era. However, the expanding Edinburgh professions mostly excluded women with the exception of education, where single women taught at the lower end of the scale.

Studies of women’s legal position have recently moved from emphasising their second-class status in the formal law codes to stressing their ways of getting around legal restrictions. There are examples of both approaches in the essays by John Finlay and Winifred Coutts. Using the Court of Session papers in the Scottish Record Office, Finlay shows how active some women could be in pleading their cases before the Lords of Council, the precursor to the Court of Session established as Scotland’s central court in the 1530s. Coutts discusses women's formal legal position in more detail, but demonstrates, as Amy Erickson has for post-Reformation England, how limitations on women’s legal rights were overcome by marriage contracts and testaments.

In post-Reformation Scotland, women faced the courts of a newly-Protestant nation, sometimes with lethal results in the case of the Scottish
witch-hunt. Michael Graham examines the ways in which women were treated by the kirk sessions, local parish church courts, especially in the area of moral discipline. This was set against a pervading sense of public order linked to the enforcement of the Reformation which women may have found repressive. However, Graham’s examination of the surviving records for the period 1560–1600 suggests that although women were more likely to be called before the court to answer for sexual misbehaviour (as their pregnancies made such behaviour visible), the courts were remarkably even-handed in dealing with men and women. Women also used the courts to defend their family honour in a manner akin to their English sisters, recently highlighted by the work of Laura Gowing. The one area where women suffered the penalties of the law disproportionately was in charges of witchcraft. Eighty-five per cent of those charged were women, a ratio of women to men similar to many other areas of Europe. Historians are now beginning to examine the role of gender in Scottish witch-hunting to show how sexual immorality was often equated with witchcraft. Scotland had one of the most severe witch-hunts in Europe and this has attracted research into one of the few areas of Scottish history that openly involved women of all social strata. This has set the background for more detailed local studies of the phenomenon that are beginning to emerge.

Although underrated, no one can really deny the importance of the female sex to the procreation and rearing of humankind. It was in this central role that most Scotswomen contributed to past societies. Women and the family appear in many of these papers from the elite down to the subservient. Meikle, Thomas and von den Steinen demonstrate how royal and elite women’s marriages were often political arrangements. They were expected to produce heirs to perpetuate dynasties, but sometimes could manipulate the marriages of their own offspring in turn. Marriage customs varied from region to region, with the marriages of young St. Kildans highlighted by Stiùbhart being very different to those of the Highland women mentioned by Roxanne Reddington-Wilde, who married at a more usual age for Western Europe. Scottish ministers took particular care in their choice of a bride, as the paper by the Whytes suggests. Ministers’ wives are a neglected area of research and this contribution goes some way to amending this situation. The legal aspect of marriage again contrasts the customs of the Gàidhealtachd and Lowland Scotland. The strict legal contracts drawn up for dowers and toichers in the Lowlands contrast with the more relaxed divorces possible under Gaelic law, as Coutts and Stiùbhart demonstrate. Sadly, by the eighteenth century the older Gaelic customs were being swept away in favour of the Lowland lifestyle being adopted by the clan elite. The unique place of widows in society is reinforced by the examples given in von den Steinen’s and Reddington-
Wilde’s papers, where they could exert considerable power within their families.

The threat of death in childbirth was ever present in Scotland as elsewhere. The fascinating details about North-Eastern wet-nurses unearthed by Gordon Desbrisay will certainly fill rather large gaps in our knowledge of this female employment in Scotland. That unmarried pregnant girls were held back from the wrath of the Kirk Session by ministers and Aberdeen retailers seeking a wet-nurse for their own children is a startling revelation. These women did penance for their fornication many months later. By way of contrast, Frater and Stiúbhart prove that the illegitimate children of clan chiefs and their lower-caste mothers were not shamed or discriminated against. The fact of their existence was regarded as a source of pride.

As can be seen from the discussion above, there are many approaches to women’s history and not all of our contributors agree with one another in their view of the past. For example, some lay more stress on women’s agency, others on the factors which disadvantaged women. Far from being a problem, this indicates the flourishing nature of the field, as scholars begin to enter the debate about different interpretations of the past. It also provides a good base for student discussion. We have tried to design the book so that it can be used effectively in schools and universities, as well as by the general reader, and to introduce some of the issues raised by women’s history. Through such ongoing debate the study of the past is advanced.

Several new findings for both women’s history and Scottish history have emerged from the work undertaken for this book. Women’s participation in the legal sphere shows them to have been much more active than previously assumed. Some women even acted as procurators in the courts for others, a development possibly unique to Scotland. The link between illegitimacy rates and the ready availability of wet-nurses found in Aberdeen appears not to have been recognised in most studies of illegitimacy and wet-nursing outside Scotland. Just as ballads have increasingly been recognised as an important source for the lives of lowland women, so female songs are revealed as a major new source of material for the history of Gàidhealtachd society. The multiplicity of sources for the piety of medieval women, both religious and lay, disproves the assertion that almost nothing can be found out about medieval female religious houses. The contribution of women, especially domestic servants, to the urban economy is shown to be far more pervasive than thought. This suggests the importance of looking at internal trade as well as export trade when considering the fortunes of towns. New suggestions are made about the importance of kinship ties for women, an important issue in Scotland where kinship has loomed large in the historical
discussion. The centrality of ideas on gender in literary works, theological discussion and discipline imposed by the church is demonstrated. In court politics, women's role is shown to be far more influential than traditionally assumed, especially when 'political power' is not defined strictly in terms of holding office.

This collection is by no means the final word on women in medieval and early modern Scotland. There are many important areas to which we have not been able to give attention, due to constraints of time, space and the research that is actually taking place. Much more work is needed on women of the Gàidhealtachd - most research on Scottish women has been on women of the Scots-speaking areas. We have not been able to include material on Scandinavian women and we deliberately restricted the number of contributions on elite and royal women, though there is some fascinating work being done in this area. Supposedly straightforward questions about why many Scotswomen kept their name after marriage, whereas their English sisters could not, merit further investigation. More work also needs to be done on women's role in the rural economy, along the lines suggested by Alex Gibson and Christopher Smout in their recent Prices, Food and Wages in Early Modern Scotland. Christopher Whatley's recent essay on the contribution of women to the industrial revolution is a model of this type of research. Experiences of marriage and motherhood, sexuality, both heterosexual and homosexual and women's roles in popular culture, are topics which historians have only recently started to consider. The impact of gender has only begun to be explored in this collection. Gender ideology affected men as well as women, and in order to arrive at a clearer picture of Scottish society as a whole, this needs to be taken into account.

Rather than provide a printed bibliography, we have created an on-line bibliography on the World Wide Web at http://www.uoguelph.ca/~eewan that will be frequently updated. This will supplement the bibliographic material available in the essays. Readers are encouraged to submit suggestions for additions to Elizabeth Ewan at Dept of History, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1G 2W1 or e-mail eewan@uoguelph.ca. Through this process and the research that we hope this book will encourage, a co-operative effort can be made in recovering the history of both the women and men of Scotland's past.

NOTES

2. Women in Early Modern Ireland, (Edinburgh, 1991). Maureen would like to thank Dr Margaret Mackay for showing her a copy of this book. Little did Maggie know what she had started!


15. For the state of research in various periods see ‘Whither Scottish History?’ SHR, 73 (1994). Social history figures more prominently in modern times.


17. D. Symonds, Weep Not For Me. Women, Ballads and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland (University Park, Penn., 1997).


21. For example, *Etudes Ecossaises; Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*.


26. See note 3.

27. Scottish History Society, forthcoming.


