CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Power Behind the Merchant? Women and the Economy in Late-Seventeenth Century Edinburgh

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UNTIL FAIRLY RECENTLY it has been accepted by many social and economic historians that by 1700 women were becoming much less able to contribute independently to the economy, and that they had been reduced to a supporting role in household or workshop. In her pioneering study of early modern English women, Alice Clark took the view that 'Restoration women were but shadows of the vigorous personalities of their grandmothers'; this, however, may be more true of the surviving records than of the women themselves, and recent work has concluded that at least in some areas of the economy women continued to have the opportunity to contribute independently and actively. While individual women may have enjoyed less economic prominence as industrialisation brought in significant social and economic change, particularly in the growing towns, it may be argued that collectively women maintained their economic importance, though its focus and manifestation may have been changing. As the pre-industrial period progressed in Scotland, women were still crucial to the economy, but, increasingly, in rather different ways. If some previously prominent Edinburgh women were rendered less economically important, this may have been to a considerable extent the result of general socio-economic realignment, in which new skills and organisations were acquired by men, and in which the occupational balance was changing, rather than simply the apparent economic subjugation of women in a male-dominated society.

Those who seek to assess the independent economic contribution of Scottish women have to make do with less than plentiful source materials. Quantitative sources are particularly lacking in comprehensive household information, usually revealing occupational details about the head of the household only. Single female householders were often widows and designated thus, so that any gainful pursuit is not divulged. However, for Edinburgh a number of imperfect sources survive, including Poll Tax records and port books, which provide an opportunity to assess some late-seventeenth century women. Edinburgh was at the forefront of professionalisation and tertiary services, and it will be argued that in Scotland's capital, while a fair number of women could and did maintain a high economic profile, an important barrier to continued progress was
that women could not enter the professions. Tertiary services were not well established, nor indeed essential, in rural or less urbanised areas, and Edinburgh was unique among Scottish towns; however a unique situation demands individual attention. More conventional views on the changing status of women in this period may hold good for the rest of Scotland, and even for Edinburgh in part, but there were additional factors. This chapter will, therefore, attempt to highlight the role and functions of late seventeenth-century Edinburgh women against a background of changing social and economic structures. In particular, the role of women in the merchant and retailing trades will be examined, together with their functions in other, less visible, areas of the economy. While the economic contributions of unskilled women remained consistently important, no matter the structure of society or stage of industrialisation, higher-status women were more susceptible to the vagaries of trade and changes in social structures – as indeed were their husbands.

Industrialisation has been regarded as a major factor in the apparent reduction in the independent economic importance of women, although this view has also been challenged, particularly by historians writing from a feminist perspective, who regard gender conflict rather than industrialisation per se as the source of growing discrimination or eclipse of women from leading economic roles. It has been argued that in medieval times women could participate on equal terms with men in most occupations, but that the advent of organisations such as merchant and craft guilds, to which women could not belong, served to prevent them from acquiring new skills, thus effectively relegating them to the realms of unskilled work. The gradual separation of work from the home also played a part. It has also been argued, though, that in the industrialisation process in Scotland, ‘a major facilitating factor was the ready availability of female, and child, labour’. It may be that women and children were important because they were the groups more readily available to transfer their labour to industrial processes, but whatever the case, they were constantly necessary. It is, therefore, essential to try to reassess Edinburgh women at the beginning of the crucial transition of the capital from merchants’ town to Enlightenment city. Edinburgh, with its complex socio-economic profile, would not industrialise in the same way as Glasgow, and this may have allowed some women to maintain their economic position longer.

The sex-ratio of late seventeenth-century Edinburgh was skewed significantly, the ratio for the burgh as a whole being seventy-six males to 100 females. In the highly urbanised and central Old Kirk parish, the ratio was 71:100, but in the much more rurally-configured peripheral parishes the ratio was considerably closer to parity, the norm for more rural societies, at 89:100. The unusual ratio in the inner parishes may be
explained by the presence of large numbers of female domestic servants, who lived and worked in the households of merchants, craftsmen and professionals, together with a fair number of widows heading large households and employing female servants. These female servants, numbering well over 3000, out of a population of some 40,000, clearly influenced the economy, however indirectly, by their household work (including the lucrative and important work of the highly-paid wet nurses), their assistance in manufacturing processes, and also by their `sideline' pursuits of ale, butter and cheese selling, which they did either on behalf of their employer or on their own account. This was not an age of single-occupation work at any level of society. Individuals worked in their `designated' occupation, but supplemented their incomes by undertaking all sorts of additional economic activities, from ale selling to moneylending. Domestic servants were involved in these pursuits despite the seemingly all-inclusive nature of their primary employment. While these women were perhaps not individually crucial to the economy of Scotland's capital, collectively they certainly were, and indeed higher-status women depended on them.

The occupational profile of Edinburgh was uniquely complex, with over 180 different occupations appearing on Poll Tax returns, ranging from arithmetician to executioner, quaich maker, royal trumpeter and fencing master. Professional occupations, particularly in the central parishes, accounted for as much as thirteen per cent of all stated occupations. Although some women appeared in this category as schoolteachers, they could not enter the church or the rapidly-expanding legal and medical professions from which Edinburgh's wealth was increasingly derived.

The foundation of the Merchant Company of Edinburgh in 1681 heralded a new type of institution. Unlike the old Merchant Guild, it was not just a protectionist body defending the privileges of its members; it also indulged in corporate trading on its own behalf. Membership was deemed necessary before a merchant could trade overseas, though this proved difficult to enforce. In its early years a few women joined, although female admissions declined during the following half century. Importantly, though, the membership of women allowed their husbands to enter the Company; this has elements of continuity with the old burgess regulations, which allowed cheaper purchase of freedom if the applicant were married to the daughter of a burgess. That a woman could provide her husband with a passport to a new type of trading organisation illustrates the continuing value of women to their husbands as well as to the economy in their own right. In 1702, for example, Robert Lightbody was accepted into the Company when his second wife, Mary Campbell, had 'consigned her dues'. This practice did not long survive
the seventeenth century, but it indicates that at least a few Restoration Edinburgh women could still offer a boost to their husbands' merchant careers and emulate their allegedly more forceful grandmothers.

In her recent detailed study of women in the clothing and retail trades in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, Sanderson has shown that the Merchant Company kept a close watch on female workers, who were obliged to obtain a licence from the Company before they could sell their wares. This was a rather different state of affairs from the very early days of the Company, when women were full trading members in their own right. The pursuit of non-licenced traders of both sexes has rather more to do with the maintenance of exclusivity than the persecution of women.

Examination of the intermittently-extant Edinburgh and Leith port books for the later seventeenth century reveals a small but consistent number of women, designated as 'merchants', signing for cargoes on their own behalf, and not on behalf of their husband or other male merchant, despite the efforts of the new Merchant Company to restrict foreign trade to its membership. Indeed, there are also some instances of men signing for goods destined for females.

Between 1660 and 1700 some eighty women appear in the port records as importers or exporters of various commodities. This is a small group in comparison to the several hundred male merchants operating in the period, but these women were there and were trading independently. In general the amounts of goods credited to females were smaller than the often considerable quantities traded by men. Anna Ker, wife of Adam Darling, a practising and prosperous surgeon, was active in the 1660s, appearing on several occasions as importer and exporter of a variety of textile goods. In May 1667 she imported '160 ells flannel and other stuffe', at a duty of £8; a few months previously she had been responsible for the export 'be land for England of 1 pack and a half coarse cloth'.

While many of these merchant women had husbands who were trading actively on their own account or following one of the professions, a number were widows, though this did not prevent them from participating in 'official' business. An entry in the import registers in January 1685 in the name of Lilias Douglas, widow of merchant Robert Douglas, stated that she had been authorised 'by warrant from the Lords of the Privy Council date 16 Sept last to import from England 250 ells of red cloath at 6d or 9d the ell for cloaths to the earl of Airlies troup'. Several entries around this time referred to the import of material for army uniforms, reflecting the uncertainties of the short but turbulent reign of James VII, with its potential for armed conflict, rendering it necessary to kit out troops in anticipation of unrest.

A number of women were involved in sending quantities of stockings to England and then re-importing them after they had been dyed. As part of
a varied package of imports in August 1667, Anna Ker was credited with '40 pr Scots stockings dyed and returned';\(^{17}\) while in September 1682, Isobel Stirling sent off '55 doz worsted stockings' to London.\(^{18}\) She was one of the more active of the women during the 1670s and 1680s, her interests appearing to lie solely in textiles, including calico, silk, linen and lace, in addition to the stockings. Interestingly, all of the women were able to sign their names in the port registers, whereas a small number of male merchants were able to mark rather than sign.

Female traders may have been relatively few but they confirm that it was still possible for them to participate in business. The 'power behind the merchant' may have been behind him in terms of quantities of goods and numbers of women involved, but it was there and it was important. Many male merchants dealt in a wide variety of goods, and if some of their wives were able to organise the textile side of the operations, then they could concentrate on dealing in iron, wood and other heavier items. Women do not appear to have been involved in the wine trade.

The available port books before 1690 suggest that women were concerned almost exclusively with the movement of textiles (apart from the occasional foray into other goods, such as the forty-five pounds of tobacco imported by Janet Seaton in 1662,\(^{19}\) or the large quantities of sugar, pepper, carrot seeds, currants, raisins and mace credited to Isobel Jollie in 1667).\(^{20}\) However, from the early 1690s another aspect of women's activities appears. This may not have been a new development; it is possible that incomplete records masked the practice previously. Whatever the case, the port books begin to show a number of women branching out into the importing of a much wider range of goods, many of which were destined to stock the shelves of retail shops, owned or rented by women. Possibly towards the end of the century the retail shop, as opposed to sales from the front of a manufacturing workshop, became more common. These separate shops seem to have appeared rather later in Edinburgh than in England, where it has been suggested that by the early seventeenth century the larger towns were served by 'shops catering principally for the retail trade'.\(^{21}\)

A local taxation roll for 1699\(^{22}\) contained details of 115 commercial premises in Edinburgh, including seventy-two shops, twenty-two of which were owned or rented by women. Some women owned whole tenements, having perhaps benefited from carefully-drawn up, complex marriage contracts that ensured good and lasting financial provision. Scots law allowed women to retain greater control over heritable or immovable property after marriage than in England,\(^{23}\) and this may have helped at least some Edinburgh women to remain economically active.

Among the female shop owners was Mrs Graham, member of the Merchant Company, who also featured in port books as an overseas
merchant. Mary Campbell, who facilitated her husband’s entry into the Merchant Company, was not on the 1699 list of shopkeepers, but the 20,000 pins she imported in 1690, together with quantities of crepe, soap and needles, seem rather too many for her own use. Another active female trader, Isobel Campbell (Mrs Melville), did not appear on the taxation roll as a shopkeeper, but it seems reasonable to conclude that the many and varied goods she imported were intended to be shop stock for some of the listed shopkeepers rather than household items. She appears in the port ledgers on several occasions; one entry, dated September 1690, credited to her a mixed cargo containing: cradles, vinegar, saltpetre, iron snuffers, dishes, brass weights, ounce balances, nutmeg, mace, cloves, pepper, raisins, currants, rice, soap, dry confections, wet confections, writing paper, glasses, hat brushes, floor rubbers, hair besoms (brushes), and earthenware bowls. This list has the appearance of stock for a general store, and supports the view put forward concerning English women’s work, that ‘women were very active in retailing’. The shops kept by Edinburgh women were not temporary stalls or the rather more durable luckenbooths, but rather permanent properties which were assessed for rental value as a basis for contributions to local taxation, which was based upon property valuations rather than personal financial assets.

The limited information available confirms that some women could function at a reasonably high economic level, either in parallel with their husbands, or as widows attempting to support themselves. The retail shop offered an opportunity for women to set up this type of business and the provisions of marriage contracts probably helped some women continue in the retail trade after being widowed. Thus, in the trading and retailing aspects of late seventeenth-century Edinburgh, women could indeed provide welcome assistance, if not power, to their husbands, and in their own right. This was a period before banking had been firmly established, when business was built on precarious financial foundations, including complex property transactions, many of which involved women. Women functioned as moneylenders, lending to men and again providing indirect economic support. Elizabeth Antone, who appears on the 1699 shopkeeper’s list, lent 300 merks (£200 Scots) to Andrew Brown, a well-known Edinburgh clockmaker.

No assessment of late-seventeenth century Edinburgh women would be complete without reference to perhaps the most powerful woman of all, Agnes Campbell (Mrs Anderson), who succeeded her husband as royal printer and printer to the Tounis College (University) and ran a large and flourishing business for many years. Although Clark took the view that no women ‘ever engaged in the manual process of printing’, Campbell was by no means a non-executive director. She imported paper for the
works, undertook negotiations with the Town Council to find room in the University to set up a printing press, and dealt in person with Sir John Clerk of Penicuik for the lease of ground on his estate on which to erect a paper mill. The latter transaction is detailed in a document dated 23 April 1709, granting Agnes Campbell

the tack (lease) of the Penicuik Mill lands with wells to carry the same from the fountainhead thereof to her paper mill which she is to build upon the saids lands . . . with liberty to the said Agnes to erect and build a paper miln (mill) with as many office houses she shall think necessary upon any part of the forsaids lands she shall judge most convenient and that for the space of nineteen years.29

The cost to Campbell was to be £60 Scots entry money and an annual rental of £86, together with ‘two rimms (reams) of fynest white paper and two rimms of coarser white paper made at the said miln’. An amusing additional clause was that a local minister, Mr McGeorge, was to receive ‘as much paper as may write his sermons’ free of charge.30

Agnes Campbell was a power in her own right, as well as having assisted her husband in building up the business. Her testament, recorded at her death at the age of 80 in 1717, notes that her business inventory included some 50,000 books deposited in various Edinburgh warehouses, including 29,000 Bibles, together with copies of acts of parliament, the valuation of the stock being over £11,000 Scots, and her total assets over £78,000 Scots.31 Her position as University and royal publisher was prestigious; she was not the only printer in Edinburgh, and it may be concluded that she had proved herself more than capable of running what was clearly a substantial business concern, and also that she had enough political acumen (or helpful contacts) to survive the turbulent state of Scottish politics in the period. She may have been one of a few, but she was a woman who survived in a changing society in which it was increasingly difficult for women to head enterprises such as this.

Edinburgh had long been, and continued to be, a major focus of foreign trade, but the occupational distribution of the capital was changing. Merchant fortunes were declining by the end of the century, and the new pivot of the economy and of the realigned socio-economic profile was the professions. Professionalisation is a complex process and historiographically controversial,32 but there is little doubt that the rapid expansion of professional occupations, particularly law and medicine, during the second half of the seventeenth century, meant that women could not participate in the aspect of the economy that was growing most steadily. This is not just a matter of gender differentials; these occupations were also closed to unqualified men.

The one area of the professions in which some women could become
involved was education. The records show that a number of, mostly single, women designated themselves ‘schoolteacher’. This was, though, on the lowest rung of the professional ladder. Indeed, it is debatable whether they should be accorded the designation of professionals. Masters in the prestigious grammar schools such as the historic High School of Edinburgh were highly qualified, with university degrees, and prepared their students for the University. Female teachers had to settle for rather less. Most of the women appearing on the Poll Tax returns as schoolteachers paid tax at the lowest level and were clearly close to the poverty line. They most probably taught very basic literacy, a little music and economically-useful skills such as sewing. Christian Porteous, a widow, managed to sustain herself by teaching ‘a few children’, and Elizabeth Campbell, in similarly straitened circumstances, who ‘doth only keep a skool’, claimed to have no financial assets whatsoever.

The increasing prominence of the professions in the socio-economic profile of Edinburgh was a significant factor in reducing the potential economic strength and influence of some women. Female merchants were one thing; female doctors and lawyers quite another. It is not sufficient, though, to view this process in terms of gender conflict; unskilled and unqualified men faced the same decline in their economic potential. Professionalisation meant that medical and legal men imposed standards and entrance examinations in order to bring about exclusivity to their professional bodies. Women were thus prevented from participating in these new, economically-fruitful areas, not merely because they were women, but because they could not acquire the necessary qualifications – a problem shared by many men.

All was not lost, though. In addition to their moneylending activities, women were involved in a less active, but nonetheless important, role – the ownership of properties, which were rented out for residential accommodation. Many individuals owned substantial properties – often complete tenement buildings – but chose to rent their own dwelling houses from another owner. The reasons for this are unclear, but records show that a substantial number of women in most Edinburgh parishes owned properties. These may have been acquired as the result of marriage contracts, or as payment of debts by transfer of assets (‘physical’ rather than cash payments were still common in the period before banking began to become more formalised – the advent of cash-based banks was yet another indirect means of excluding women from some aspects of economic activity). Whatever the case, this was yet another area in which women could and did operate. Of the 2738 hearths listed for the central Old Kirk parish in the Hearth Tax returns of 1691, 460 (fifteen per cent) were owned by thirty-two women (twenty-one per cent of the owners). Mrs Wood owned a total of thirty-three hearths, divided into fairly
substantial properties; one of these comprising eight hearths, was let to Sir William Binning. In the nearby Tron parish, the female owners, who accounted for seventeen per cent of the hearths, included Widow Heriot, one of whose tenants was the Marquis of Douglas, who rented a property with seven hearths, while Mrs Cessford owned no fewer than seventy hearths, her own spacious dwelling comprising twelve hearths.\textsuperscript{36} Even in the poorer suburbs, which were much more ‘rural’ in socio-economic configuration, women still featured as property owners. In the large and sprawling West Kirk parish, which almost completely encircled the inner town, women comprised thirteen per cent of the house owners, and owned twelve per cent of the hearths.\textsuperscript{37}

This is, perhaps, a rather indirect aspect of the economy, but confirms that women could be substantial property owners. The rentals on their properties provided them with an income, part of which could be let out at interest, or used in retailing or trading. The urban setting provided opportunities for women in many areas of the economy in its widest sense, and property ownership was one means by which they could remain independent. It may be that this type of activity was more feasible for Scottish women because their husbands could not dispose of their property without their permission; whatever the case, though, the pre-banking world continued to offer opportunities.

The question of the continuing role of women in the economy of late-seventeenth century Edinburgh is complex and must be viewed on several levels. Unskilled women had always been, and would continue to be, economically vital in terms of their numbers and physical labour. Women who had been able to deal independently and run retail businesses faced the same difficulties as did their husbands in a period of economic downturn, not helped by the ‘ill-years’ of the 1690s, nor by the French and Dutch wars, nor by the ill-fated Darien Scheme, which resulted in the loss of a quarter of Scotland’s liquid assets. The power behind the merchant was weakened, but so was the power of the merchants themselves. Edinburgh entered the eighteenth century with a rather different occupational configuration from that with which she had begun the seventeenth. The position of women was similarly altered, but in many respects they were just as important and necessary to the economy as they always had been.

NOTES

1. I am most grateful to Dr Anne Laurence of the Open University for her helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of the chapter.


4. Scottish Record Office [SRO], E70/4/1-11, 1694 Poll Tax; E72, port books.


10. Ibid, 142, Table 5.1.

11. Merchant Company of Edinburgh, MS Roll of Members, 1702.


13. SRO, E72/15/5, 21 Feb. 1667.

14. SRO, E72/8/3, 16 May 1667; E72/8/3/, 1 Nov. 1666.


17. SRO, E72/8/3, 1 Aug. 1667.

18. SRO, E72/8/11, 18 Sept. 1682; E72/8/14, 8 Sept. 1684.

19. SRO, E72/8/1, 19 Nov. 1662.

20. SRO, E72/15/5, 25 March 1667.


22. Edinburgh City Archive, Stent Roll, 1699.


24. SRO, E72/15/45, 4 March 1690.

25. SRO, E72/15/45, 30 Sept. 1690.


27. SRO, RH15/7/3, business papers.


29. SRO, GD18/889/2, Clerk of Penicuik Papers.

30. SRO, GD18/5278, 4 Sept. 1711.


33. SRO, E70/4/7, Poll Tax, Tron Parish.

34. SRO, E70/4/6, Poll Tax, Tolbooth Parish.

35. SRO, E69/16/2, Hearth Tax.

36. SRO, E69/16/2.

37. SRO, E69/16/3.