

## Independent Women Scholars Write (Women's) Medieval History

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Independent scholarly writing on the Middle Ages began as a dignified amateur endeavour in, and in a few instances before, the eighteenth century, although a bemused reading public has often marvelled at why anyone with a superior education and leisure would bother. For this reason, amateur scholars have often felt it necessary to justify their choice of a scholarly pursuit, and this continues down to our own day. Women scholars like Margaret Wade Labarge (1916-2009), whom we celebrate here, often had little choice but to pursue their scholarly interests independently because in her day academic positions were largely awarded to men. Labarge justified her career choice straightforwardly as based on a lifelong interest in the Middle Ages. Despite sporadic appointments as visiting scholar at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, Margaret Wade Labarge spent her career primarily in research and writing, and she chose to view her status on the periphery of academic institutions positively since it left her free to study and write what she wished. She chose her scholarly projects herself, pursued them independently, and found publishers willing to place her work before the public: as a result, she enjoyed some commercial success and, with it, stature within her chosen field of study. There are many reasons to celebrate Margaret Wade Labarge and place her among the women scholars who pursued similar independent careers in medieval studies and, in doing so, designed medieval women's history in ways that resonate to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Elstob is the first in a line of independent women scholars working on the medieval past that continues to this day; Hughes, "Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756)." I am grateful for the

This essay investigates how independent women scholars succeeded against the odds in writing women's history, a history often mediated by their own original historiographical insights. At least some of these scholars seem to have recognized the unusual opportunities their marginalized position afforded them and exploited it, that is to say, their independent, sometimes isolated, status placed women scholars in a unique position to open new issues for historical review and to create the necessary intellectual tools for their projects. Certainly, this has proved to be the case for medieval women's history and, to some extent, for the related fields of family history and the history of households, material life, and gender, as well as certain genres of medieval literature in which women figured prominently. Marginalization was a fact of life for independent women scholars when universities emerged as the defining institutions of intellectual life in the nineteenth century, ensuring that women scholars would work outside the academy and often did not even have the privilege of writing for a scholarly audience because they were directed by their publishers towards a popular audience composed largely of literate women.

The Canadian scholar Margaret Wade Labarge is in fine company in her lifelong role as independent scholar of the Middle Ages. Initially she turned her attention to mainstream medieval concerns, completing a book on Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, in 1962. The reviews were positive, and having travelled to London, she obtained a contract for a monograph on Louis IX of France. As a bonus, her publisher gave her a second contract to write a companion study to her Simon de Montfort monograph, featuring his baronial household and that of Countess Eleanor, Simon's wife and sister to King Henry III, with whom Simon de Montfort later went to war. By this route, Margaret Wade Labarge entered women's history through studying the lives of well-born lay women. To complement the de Montfort book, she studied the family's material life in depth, anticipating by a few years Fernand Braudel's celebrated *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme (XV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* that would not appear until 1967 (and then only in an unannotated version). Labarge drew on some highly specific English studies of castles, forests, and English household administration and integrated these studies into a synthesis on the material life of a great household of the thirteenth century.

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excellent bibliographies of many of the women represented in Jane Chance's collection *Women Medievalists and the Academy*. I also wish to thank the libraries of Haverford College and Bryn Mawr College for keeping in their collections the original editions of the works cited here so they could be consulted.

Labarge befriended the University of Toronto Basilian scholars Fathers Michael M. Sheehan and Ambrose Raftis and drew on their work on marriage and on the material life of English manors, respectively. She had collected and mastered the records of the public acts of Simon de Montfort and then, for *A Baronial Household of the Thirteenth Century* (1965), turned the question around and looked at the earl's private life and marriage. Simon's wife, Eleanor, sister of the king and widow of William Marshal the younger, whom she had wed at age nine, became Labarge's first woman protagonist. Eleanor shares the stage with her husband and household, and her contextualized household accounts were the chief sources that sustained the argument of *A Baronial Household of the Thirteenth Century*. Labarge's work was addressed to a popular audience who would enjoy the details of a noble household that were presented here, but the author had serious purposes rather than entertainment in mind when analysing medieval women's work.

It is instructive to watch Labarge construct the tools to understand the material life of a laywoman of the thirteenth century. In Chapter Two, "The Lady of the House," she first acknowledged that the evidence was varied and conflicted with conduct literature (by "writers on manners") and with the pronouncements of moralists speaking of a divinely ordained subordination of women because of women's "foolishness"; to these images of women, she contrasted the "amazing heroines" of courtly love and men's descriptions of their allure.<sup>2</sup> Neither strain of literature, she argued, had much relevance to Eleanor's life, so Labarge next had recourse to life models from the age, largely regents or brave women like the countess of Arundel, who reproved Henry III for failing to keep his oaths on the Great Charter. Labarge argued that, in the thirteenth century, there was an enormous gulf between the life of a young girl and that of a married woman, and quoting Frederic William Maitland on the legal rights of women, she discussed the kinds of authority married women possessed.<sup>3</sup> She added that "the wife of a great baron often played an extraordinarily important part in the marriage [. . .] an accepted fact that contemporary writers usually ignore [. . .] as too ordinary for comment."<sup>4</sup> The rest of the chapter enumerated the many, largely administrative tasks Countess Eleanor performed; Labarge excepted roles which readers might have anticipated, such as child-rearing. She used rolls of

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2 Labarge, *A Baronial Household*, 38.

3 Labarge, *A Baronial Household*, 40, citing Pollock and Maitland, *The History of English Law*, 1:482.

4 Labarge, *A Baronial Household*, 41.

household accounts, which, although incomplete, contained gaps that could be filled by reference to records from other noble households or from a treatise composed by Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, for the countess of Lincoln after her husband's death in 1240.<sup>5</sup> The result is a composite picture of considerable complexity, despite the fact that no personal records save wills and no revelatory documents like diaries were available on which to build a biography.

Labarge was inventing the tools for analysing the lives of medieval women in secular society. It was necessary to begin at the pinnacle of society because at least there she had partial rolls of household accounts. The great household of a princess of the royal blood and wife of the most powerful baron in thirteenth-century England yielded just enough evidence so that the project of biography could be undertaken. In the process, Labarge laid out the necessary steps to understand women's lives in secular society. First, she disposed of the moralizing literature that subjected women to the rule of their fathers, husbands, and sons. Next, she contrasted that literature with laudatory opinions found in courtly romances and their adulation of women. Then she looked at documented lives of women and contrasted those with conduct literature and romances. Finally, she gathered together what could be known of the subject's particular condition in life. Labarge concentrated on Lady Eleanor's life as revealed in preserved rolls or household accounts, records that fit the description, in David Herlihy's words, of "the documents of practice," that is, preserved personal, administrative, and legal records.<sup>6</sup> These texts were never intended for historians' eyes and often prove reliable guides for that very reason. Once the context of household accounts was adequately explained, these documents of practice could be trusted to provide an accurate picture of the life of a medieval woman.

The household accounts give glimpses of a great lady's many activities. From numerous entries it is easy to see that many, in fact most, of the countess's occupations were not particularly domestic, or feminine in any restricted sense. As Labarge notes,

The primary duty of a great baron's wife was to produce the heir necessary to carry on the line, and then to serve as an active partner with her husband in the many enterprises of feudal life. She might even, when necessary, take sole charge. The purely domestic routine of the lady of

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<sup>5</sup> Labarge, *A Baronial Household*, 40, citing Thomson, trans. & ed., *The Writings of Robert Grosseteste*, 148-50, 158-59.

<sup>6</sup> Herlihy, "Land, Family and Women," esp. 92, 104.

the house in such a vast establishment was discharged by a well-planned and carefully detailed organization which was responsible for the smooth running of the domestic machinery.<sup>7</sup>

Labarge went out of her way to counter the unspoken expectations modern readers have concerning a woman of rank in thirteenth-century England. Countess Eleanor fulfilled her duties by bearing heirs, not by raising them, and she was not domestic in any modern sense of the word. Labarge struggled with changing societal definitions of gender, addressing readers' anticipated assumptions. Taking advantage of the account rolls, Labarge then spent the rest of her volume conveying interesting detail about the material life of the household, food and drink, clothes and travel, and even the amusements of a baronial household. This would entertain readers, but it was written seriously with painstaking attention to detail. The book was footnoted, with an appendix dealing with rolls as sources, a nine-page bibliography, and an index. The author's non-academic readers could use the text as scholarly history if they chose to do so.

Good reviews, together with her ability to write for the public rather than just for her fellow scholars, had won Margaret Wade Labarge the opportunity to take her topic in the direction she chose. Seventeen years later, *Medieval Travellers: The Rich and Restless* was published in 1982.<sup>8</sup> It was a richly illustrated work produced on fine paper. The first chapters dealt with geography, points of departure, and travel of kings and queens, of nobles, pilgrims, diplomats, and Church dignitaries, but then it branched out to consider visits among kin and friends, with attention to conduct at tournaments and entertainments, and it also looked at medieval adventurers. Labarge employed a very broad definition of travel writing that more typically limited itself to travellers who took long journeys and wrote home vivid accounts of their adventures on the road and in exotic lands. Much of the travel described was close to home in England, which allowed Labarge to pay attention to ordinary folk, rather than famous travellers like William of Rubruck or Marco Polo. Since the book was intended to amuse the public, Labarge had been given the chance to take the topic in any direction she saw fit, and her choice was to write social commentary. The last chapter presented the final journey, that is, to the grave, and included discussion of

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7 Labarge, *A Baronial Household*, 51-52.

8 In the interim, Labarge published *Saint Louis* (1968), *Henry V* (1975), and *Gascony, England's First Colony* (1980).

effigies and burial customs. This work came with an even more extensive scholarly apparatus for the interested reader than did *A Baronial Household*. Both books could be, and were, included in medieval course bibliographies in North America.<sup>9</sup>

Four years later, in 1986, Margaret Wade Labarge published *Women in Medieval Life: A Small Sound of the Trumpet*, which also appeared in the same year in the United States, with its subtitle first, as *A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*. Despite the slightly diminishing cast rendered by the inversion in the title of the American edition — it was a favourite quotation from Hildegard of Bingen — Labarge made some significant claims for medieval women. Religious women received their due, but in this overview, Labarge went out of her way to give working women credit for their contributions to medieval life. This monograph, like its predecessors, is directed to general readers, and she claims, relying heavily on the negative, that medieval women “were neither invisible, inaudible, nor unimportant” despite what received histories say.<sup>10</sup> Like its two predecessors, it was reviewed as balanced and sane, although this seems small praise. I had the opportunity to review this volume as serious scholarship and wrote in the *American Historical Review*, “The usefulness of this study lies in the author’s attempt to place medieval women in their social context, so reconstructions of peasant communities, criminal behavior, and artisan family life, as well as the voices of authorities and female worthies, fill the chapters.”<sup>11</sup> Mabel of Bury St. Edmunds, embroiderer to King Henry III, appeared along with Jacqueline Felicie, who defended her right to practise medicine before the Paris faculty of medicine in 1322, although she lost.<sup>12</sup> Rather than sane and balanced, that is, damned by faint praise, I saw this work as a valuable synthesis on medieval women that considered more than those of high rank and more than the sum of moralists’ condemnations of women.

The scholarly apparatus for this work was even more elaborate than that in the preceding volumes. Perhaps most importantly, Margaret Wade Labarge made arguments about gender. An enthusiastic conference attendee, Labarge often travelled

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9 The reception of Margaret Wade Labarge’s papers at conferences like the International *Congress on Medieval Studies* in Kalamazoo, Michigan, indicates the value placed on her work for course syllabi and bibliographies by historians in academic positions.

10 Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 238, and *A Small Sound of the Trumpet*, 238.

11 Stuard, review of *A Small Sound of the Trumpet*, by Margaret Wade Labarge, 400. Published in 1988, this seems to have been the first review of Labarge’s work to appear in the *American Historical Review*.

12 Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 228-29, 175-77, and *A Small Sound of the Trumpet*, 228-29, 175-77.

to Kalamazoo, Michigan, for the International Congress on Medieval Studies, to meetings of the Medieval Academy of America, and also to England for scholarly conferences; she became Canada's recognized authority on medieval women. Some of her many lectures were eventually published in her *Medieval Miscellany* (1997). From the outset in the 1970s she had been a party to the intense debate over gender as a critical category of historical analysis in the English-speaking world.

Margaret Wade Labarge was invited to teach as a visiting lecturer at both Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, although she remained an independent scholar all her life. While women in North America and Europe may obtain positions in colleges and universities today when, and sometimes because, they list their field as medieval women's history, there is no certainty that this historical field will continue to find a place in academia for women scholars. However, independent scholars today continue to add to the tools of historical analysis from their marginalized positions, as did Margaret Wade Labarge, at least partly because this vantage point provides the freedom for the author to mark out her own interpretive stance.

There is a line of independent women scholars who came before Margaret Wade Labarge and who helped forge the contours of the sub-discipline we now call medieval women's history and gender studies. Certainly, not all independent women scholars wished to study the lives of medieval women, but those who did took on a challenge. Since publishers directed them towards writing for the general reader rather than the specialist, these women found it necessary to write clear expository prose. They knew their sources but cited them without overwhelming their monographs with scholarly notations. In a word, they learned to write well and to engage their readers while opening new tracks for future study; this was their path into the serious practice of medieval history. Any instructor in a course would be well advised to include one or more of the texts discussed here in assignments or bibliography. Over the years, students have taken up the work of these independent scholars and pursued ideas they found there in their own essays and course papers. This was my own introduction to the literature on medieval women, and I dare say many others may say the same thing.

Lina Eckenstein (1857-1931) represents an extreme in the eclecticism that may mark the career of an independent scholar. Her great contribution to the field, *Woman under Monasticism*, published in 1896 by Cambridge University Press, appeared seven short years after her first scholarly project of transcribing and translating Albrecht Dürer's difficult manuscripts housed in the British Museum, at the behest of William Martin Conway, who was preparing a work on Dürer for publication but could

not decipher his script.<sup>13</sup> Educated at home, Eckenstein read Latin, Greek, Middle High German, and Middle English and was fluent in modern German, French, and Italian. Her fine transcription and notes brought her little recognition, while Conway gained the reputation of an expert from the published study. Thirteen years later, Eckenstein published her own study, *Albrecht Dürer*, which appeared in the Popular Library of Art series with Duckworth Press in 1902, a book aimed at the general public, not scholars. The decision to publish the book in a series intended for a popular rather than scholarly audience reveals the hand of her editor: women were not to be published as authoritative experts on scholarly subjects, despite the fact that Conway could never have transcribed and edited Dürer's papers without Eckenstein's assistance in the earlier authoritative monograph.

In writing *Woman under Monasticism*, Eckenstein tackled another subject of ostensibly popular interest. Men in the academy who wrote Church history found nuns of negligible interest, but English publishers believed there was a potential readership among educated women who would buy the book. Echoing the eighteenth-century Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756) on the significance of writing about medieval women for contemporary women readers, albeit in a more theoretical vein, Eckenstein spoke in her study of earlier pagan times as "the mother-age, when women held positions of authority inside the tribal group" which, rather than disappearing, found perpetuation of a sort in women's religious institutions once Europe converted to Christianity. J. J. Bachofen's anthropological study *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) served as the theoretical underpinning for her argument, although it had little currency among English readers;<sup>14</sup> certainly, the evolutionary arguments and social theory found in Bachofen were far from the historical positivism that held sway in British university circles. Indeed, Eckenstein's use of Bachofen's evolutionary ideas presented readers with a questionable theoretical leap from pagan to Christian times, with women in ascendant roles as religious leaders forming the link between the two ages; nevertheless, Bachofen's formulae allowed Eckenstein to see women's monastic houses as institutions with all the necessary features and functions of self-sustaining social communities. She viewed women's religious houses as small, autonomous universes complete in themselves. Even if her take on "heathendom" and its legacies failed to

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13 *Literary Remains of Albrecht Dürer* (1889); see Johnson, "Lina Eckenstein (1857-1931)," 57-58.

14 Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism*, 2. Eckenstein cites Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht*, as well as other supporting works on German social theory and studies of German mythology. These were likely unknown to an English audience at the time.

be quite convincing, it prompted Eckenstein to explore issues like women's authority and literacy, relying on examples from German monastic houses, mystics, "woman-saints," the spread of monasticism, new monastic orders, visitations to houses, and finally the dissolution of nunneries in England. Initially, Eckenstein favoured the essentialist "woman" over "women" as her topic, a legacy of Bachofen's social theory, but after her introductory theoretical remarks, she gradually fell into as straightforward a narrative approach as any positivist university historian in England and adopted "women" as subject instead. As a result, she unearthed a wealth of information on women in religious orders and what their lives demonstrated, none of which had previously been presented in a single coherent narrative within the covers of a scholarly English monograph.

Eckenstein was analytic, and surprising, in what she had to say about *women's* education as practised in England over the centuries. (By then she had eschewed the use of the essentializing term *woman*, with its connotation of a universal, unchanging condition.) She concluded that it was in England, where change in medieval social conditions for women had been most complete due to the dissolution of women's monasteries, that "women for a time entirely forfeited all the advantages which a higher education brings, and which were secured in so great a measure to women by convents in the past, that the modern movement for women's education has arisen."<sup>15</sup> Eckenstein, true to her sources and historical judgements, indulged in no partisan claims for Continental medieval monastic women ensuring a literate future for women generally. Thus, *Woman under Monasticism* escaped the positivist tendency to write history as a progressive and providential story. According to Eckenstein's account, medieval women under monasticism were significant in their own time and place because of their own accomplishments and what they stood for as literate women dedicated to holy lives. For this reason, her work became a foundational study on which many later scholars have based their work. German social theory may have provided an entry point into her topic, but Eckenstein's conclusions were balanced and critical, more in the positivist vein than one might expect, and certainly less essentialist than her introductory remarks would suggest. Her conclusions were also less broadly applied than those of many medieval scholars working in the academy.

Another in the line of independent women scholars, Mary Bateson (1865-1906), was attached to Newnham College, Cambridge University, from her youth until the end of her life. She attended the college and earned first-class standing in history but,

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<sup>15</sup> Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism*, 484.

as a woman, received a certificate, not a degree. Dr. Mandell Creighton, her mentor and friend, made possible her early publishing career within the pages of the *English Historical Review*, where Bateson presented mostly brief scholarly editions of texts. There is no reliable record of Bateson teaching or serving as a tutor at Newnham College, although she clearly did teach or tutor after 1893.<sup>16</sup> Bateson was a suffragette and activist, which added to her prestige at Newnham College but also affirmed her status as an activist rather than a Cambridge-identified scholar writing about the Middle Ages.

Lina Eckenstein had chosen to write on religious women, and Mary Bateson's originality emerged in much the same fashion when challenged to write religious women's history. Both Bateson and Eckenstein are interesting in the historiographical dimension of their work for that reason. In writing "Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries," published in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Bateson presented early medieval double monasteries to her readers, paying no attention to the issue of national origins, the context in which they had been understood before 1899. She characterized double houses as places where regular clergy ministered to the spiritual needs of enclosed women who were under the Rule.<sup>17</sup> All other considerations like leadership (by an abbot or an abbess) were secondary and varied widely. No cultural origins, Eastern or Celtic, or any line of descent defined double houses in Bateson's treatment; indeed, she saw the quest for origins as misleading in regard to understanding double monasteries where both women and men were enclosed. Bateson emphasized the purpose of double houses, that is, ministering to the religious needs of women, who could not become priests and administer the sacraments themselves within a religious house or travel outside to receive them. Fervent faith and societal respect for priestly intercession for devout women gave double houses their important role in early medieval times, she argued. Defining double houses as she did, Bateson, like Eckenstein, travelled a long way towards recapturing the religious devotion of holy women and the respect in which they were held by their neighbours as well as by the powerful religious and secular authorities of the day.<sup>18</sup>

Together Eckenstein and Bateson built a new understanding of medieval women's religious devotion, and this sounded an unexpected note in the historical understanding of the Middle Ages, although it appears to have been originally more likely to

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16 See Dockray-Miller, "Mary Bateson (1865-1906)," 69-72. Dockray-Miller, her biographer, can find no positive evidence that Bateson was appointed tutor or lecturer at Newnham College.

17 Bateson, "Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries," 138.

18 For further discussion, see Stuard, "The Chase After Theory."

resonate among popular readers than among historians. The independent American scholar Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960) would further that trend; her career reveals interesting parallels with Eckenstein's and Bateson's. All three were recognized for their talent at interpreting manuscripts, and each was set to transcribing, translating, and editing as scholarly pursuits considered suitable for an educated woman before any of the three attempted historical synthesis with a focus on medieval women. These pioneers in the field were not expected to, or considered talented enough to, produce monographs or interpretive articles, that is, to move very far beyond the task of manuscript editing. The exception was Mary Bateson, whose double-monastery study appeared in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, where patronage by Creighton and good fortune may have played a part.

Male colleagues and advisors envisioned the work of these women as the recovery of sources that others would expertly analyse, interpret, and evaluate. Each of these women could boast lists of publications, but the titles reveal that much of their work was textual in nature, based on transcribing, and little reliant on interpretive skills. As such, these scholars would not qualify as authoritative historians in the intellectual circles they valued so highly; they were not considered for university professorships. For this reason, independent incomes were essential. Lacking university appointments, they were not offered much in the way of payment for their scholarly work, although as medieval history became less antiquarian and more scientific in its methods, it was recognized that they played valuable roles. They performed the manuscript retrieval and editing tasks that often fell to women if they wished to spend their lives among fellow intellectuals pursuing learning. Relegated to marginal roles and paid little or nothing for the privilege, only the most determined women remained in the field.

Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960) was clearly destined for such a role. While still an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College, Allen began her study of the *Ancrene Riwe* (now *Ancrene Wisse*), which she believed was written in twelfth-century England, although scholars now place it in the thirteenth century. Subsequently, Allen began her study of the mystic Richard Rolle and published on the authorship of the *Prick of Conscience*, though in a festschrift for Agnes Irwin rather than in a prestigious scholarly journal. She devoted the rest of her career to Richard Rolle, the *Ancrene Wisse*, and the fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe*. An agnostic herself, Allen appreciated the literary attributes of mystical writers that allowed their texts to move their readers to religious devotion and mystical visions.

Hope Emily Allen's findings about the *Ancrene Wisse's* origins in the twelfth century are not the basis of her prestige as a scholar. Her early work, including her tentative identification of the three women intended as the recipients of the text (these findings have been superseded), served largely as the groundwork for her later insights into mysticism. Allen's great contribution came when she introduced innovative approaches into the study of the revelatory texts of mystics and devout women:<sup>19</sup> "my work," she stated, "would combine literary and historical research and concentrate on what would interpret religion as it was brought home to the individual, rather than as it touched ecclesiastical institutions or theological doctrines."<sup>20</sup> Personal devotion and faith became her scholarly concerns.

After nursing her father in her early adult years, she moved to England to be near her manuscript sources and, fortified by a generous income from the break-up of the Oneida Community where she was heir to her parents' share of surviving businesses, Allen could pay J. A. Herbert of the British Museum for consultations and work on Richard Rolle for the substantial monograph she would produce in 1928, *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and Materials for His Biography*.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently she turned her attention to a newly discovered fifteenth-century manuscript brought to the Victoria and Albert Museum by Colonel William E. I. Butler-Bowdon. Editing this remarkable manuscript of the *Book of Margery Kempe* — whose discovery Evelyn Underhill describes as "almost equally important to students of medieval manners, and disconcerting to students of medieval mysticism"<sup>22</sup> — was to be a collaboration between Allen and Sanford Brown Meech, but when Meech, a perfectionist with regard to linguistic precision, contested Allen's right to work with the manuscript, let alone edit it, their relationship turned acrimonious. The controversy became so serious that the Early English Text Society had to step in and award the editing to Meech and a second compilation of notes on mystical practices as they related to the text to Allen. The resulting volume was prepared under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies and published in England by Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society (1940). Writing the notes gave Allen the role

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19 See Hirsh, "Hope Emily Allen, the Second Volume of the *Book of Margery Kempe*"; and Mitchell, "The Ever-Growing Army."

20 Mitchell, "The Ever-Growing Army," 19.

21 The work is dated 1927 but was published early in the following year; see Hirsh, "Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960)," 233-35.

22 Underhill, review of *The Book of Margery Kempe: A Modern Version by W. Butler-Bowden*, 642.

she wished: she was able to interpret the text in terms of what she knew of mystics in late medieval England. Allen's work now stands as one of the most important acts of recovery and interpretation of an English medieval manuscript in our time.

Allen's bitter controversy with Meech, whom she had originally chosen to edit *The Book of Margery Kempe* with her, illustrates the dilemmas women scholars confronted when they ventured into historical interpretation. As the senior and published scholar, Allen had considerable stature as a historian when she took on the project, but the rash, younger Meech questioned her ability to interpret the newly recovered text. While John Hirsh, Allen's biographer, believes that Meech would not have attacked a senior male scholar as boldly as he did Allen, Meech next challenged the competence of his project director, Thomas A. Knott at the *Middle English Dictionary* project housed at the University of Michigan, in openly dismissive language.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile the owner of the Kempe manuscript, Butler-Bowdon, demanded a popular edition of the book to be published quickly. The Meech-Allen quarrel held up publication, and in the end responsibility for both the scholarly edition and the popular one had to be arbitrated, which delayed the publication.<sup>24</sup>

That Allen could break through to the role of historian and authority on recovered medieval texts despite being embattled indicates the importance of her scholarship. What may also be detected here is something of a literary turn in historical study, which may be glimpsed in the work of Eckenstein and Bateson as well. It is a strange but inspiring possibility that these women, who often wrote for a popular audience and were easily marginalized within learned circles, may have anticipated the French-inspired turn towards literary theory that occurred in later decades of the twentieth century. If so, it was not in any way a self-conscious recourse to sophisticated theorizing but rather a result of serious efforts to interpret medieval acts and thoughts so at odds with twentieth-century sensibilities. In the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's formula, these women wanted to connect "action to its sense rather than behavior to its determinants."<sup>25</sup> This should be understood as a social scientist's attempt to discipline her or his own thinking by narrowing the focus to just how a text contextualizes, and justifies, an action or thought; this allows the interpreter to

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23 See Hirsh, "Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960)," 235; and Hirsh, *Hope Emily Allen*, 127.

24 For a detailed account of the relationship between Allen and Meech, see Hirsh, *Hope Emily Allen*, 113-29; for an account from Meech's perspective, cp. Adams, "Sanford Brown Meech at the *Middle English Dictionary*."

25 Geertz, "Blurred Genres," 34.

view the act's significance in its own time and place rather than from the perspective of her own time. All three women encountered a world so remote from present-day Western culture in terms of gender that they had to invent the language needed to convey the historical implications of gender issues to their readers.

With leisure to devote herself wholly to her studies and with private funds to pay Herbert for his invaluable help, Allen was able to become an acknowledged expert on Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe and took her place among the interpreters of English medieval history.<sup>26</sup> This occurred less than half a century after Eckenstein began her important work with *Woman under Monasticism* and represents a significant transformation in the understanding of gender as a historical variant, along with the recognition of medieval women as historical personages. With *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Allen found a much larger audience than medieval studies generally attracted, and her readers were awed by Margery's sensibilities that were so at odds with modern life.

The effort to connect "action to its sense rather than behavior to its determinants" was in this context a method for freeing up historical analysis from assumptions framed by our modern "mental tools" as Annaliste historians like Lucien Febvre have proposed.<sup>27</sup> At the most rudimentary level, Peter Dronke argued, there have been no manuscripts authored by medieval women that have not been, at one time or another, re-attributed to a medieval male author on the grounds that a woman could not have written that text.<sup>28</sup> From this departure point of outright dismissal of any medieval woman as author, problems of reception have continued to multiply over the decades because it is a challenge to contextualize anything written by a medieval woman so that it will be comprehensible to contemporary readers. This lies behind the overt skepticism that independent women scholars writing about medieval women encountered in academia. Equally difficult was the widely held assumption that women had no consequential history since they remained static domestic figures in a world where men underwent dynamic historical change. Men profited by changes, suffered from them, and promoted or subverted them, but consequently had substantive histories worth recording because change occurred in their

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26 It should be noted that while Allen's private wealth sustained her through her early years, the Depression cut into her income and later she accepted a position with the *Middle English Dictionary* project at the University of Michigan in order to support herself.

27 Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, 355-70.

28 For attribution of Hrotsvitha's manuscripts to a male author and allegations that male secretaries played a large part in Hildegard's compositions, see Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, ix.

lives. Women, judged unchanging, did not rise to the notice of history. A medieval queen who wielded power might be acknowledged as a historical figure if she served as regent for an underage son, ruled in her own right, or usurped power. While she might escape invisibility on these grounds, medieval women in positions of power were nevertheless assessed by the intellectual tools employed to analyse men with authority and power, and, translated into this mode, powerful women were largely understood as 'honorary' men. Yet assumptions about gender still played a role: if a queen was judged derogatorily, she was very likely blamed for transgressing gender norms. A clearer understanding of gender as a tool of historical analysis could remedy this apparent contradiction.

Except in the case of queens and a few women saints, unstated canons of significance present in positivist history nullified medieval women's agency and historical significance. The medieval period is particularly problematic because there are surviving texts and records written by women and about women; hence some women left historical records that did not conform to prevailing assumptions about invisibility. Were these records to be dismissed out of hand? The sum total of records from the centuries before 1500 C.E. was finite, and it appeared to some in the scholarly world of the first half of the twentieth century that to discard any medieval text as insignificant was to dismiss evidence that had value if only because it came from medieval times. Allowing independent women scholars to work on documents by or about women — to edit them, annotate them, and translate them into modern languages, and even to a limited extent interpret them — was therefore a thrifty use of trained and inexpensive talent. However, it came as a surprise to scholars that a newly discovered text like *The Book of Margery Kempe* actually caused excitement with the public and that a woman scholar like Allen could become an authority through her skill at interpreting the *Ancrene Wisse*, Richard Rolle, and Margery Kempe's book.

Texts by medieval women edited and annotated by women scholars often existed as curiosities, in contrast to the legal and institutional records analysed by male medievalists with university positions. Women's history was seldom greeted with explicit derision but rather devalued or ignored, so reception was not explicitly misogynous but rather axiomatically so. Sanford Meech's angry attack on Hope Emily Allen and her notes on *The Book of Margery Kempe* may have been more easily faced than the more frequent dismissals by condescension if only because Meech was open, direct, and answerable in a public forum. The belittling of work by women about medieval women often relegated worthwhile studies to the field of popular history. Since it was not considered serious history, publishers reinforced the historical profession's

indifference to work about medieval women by women scholars by urging women to write for the general public. Crossing an invisible line into mainstream history was difficult at best.

In assessing the influence of feminism on twentieth-century scholarship, Helen Vendler (who does not apply the term *feminist* to herself) has said, “Of these [works] the clearest successes seem to be in the fields of history and sociology, where newly retrieved information about women’s lives, interesting in itself, also has explanatory power.”<sup>29</sup> Independent women historians wrote with skill about women’s lives in a way that was intriguing, even compelling, and therefore capable of attracting an audience of general readers. Eckenstein and Allen both constructed bridges to connect modern readers to medieval texts and wrote with a popular rather than a learned audience in mind, that is to say, they spoke to the *mentalité* of their present readership and explained and contextualized the medieval texts that appeared on the published page in comprehensible language that bridged the gap between the present and the medieval past. Gaining explanatory power, the second of Vendler’s points, meant convincing the academy as well as the general reading public that there was history worth considering — that the retrieval of texts by and about women would expand our understanding of the Middle Ages. Largely unacknowledged, independent women scholars were nevertheless fashioning tools that would be useful to scholars working with texts by and about women in other times and places remote from their own. In the course of time, these independent scholars made an important contribution to the ‘new history of women’ that increased in importance in and after the 1970s. This is a broad claim for a few women scholars who wrote for the general public earlier in the twentieth century.

A chief device for positivist scholars of the early twentieth century was argument from selected example, where author and reader accept the same canons of significance. Frederic William Maitland could explain the origin of English Common Law to his readers because readers accepted the significance of the Common Law for English-speaking peoples. Was it possible for independent women scholars to argue similarly from selected example about women-authored texts? Author and reader must share the same sense of the significant for such an argument to be convincing. For a popular audience, this may have been possible when historians described lives of women from a remote time but provided homely details about early medieval women, which were

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29 Vendler, “Feminism and Literature,” 19.

at times similar but often curiously different from present women's lives. Histories by Eckenstein, Bateson, and Allen featured many examples of this sort.

For instance, Lina Eckenstein incorporated the very entertaining writings of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim into *Woman under Monasticism*, along with information about the education of this tenth-century nun and her teachers, the nun Rikkardis and the abbess Gerberga of Gandersheim. Eckenstein could translate well and actually presented scenes from Hrotsvitha's drama *Dulcetiis* (now commonly *Dulcitius*), commenting that "Its popularity is no doubt due to the juxtaposition of entirely divergent elements, the pathos of martyrdom being in close company with scenes of broad humour."<sup>30</sup> Eckenstein also included scenes from the plays *Calimachus* and *Abraham* that were unlike any historical dramas modern audiences had encountered. Would a modern audience believe her tale of a German nun who read and loved the ancient Roman author Terence, lived one thousand years ago, and produced lively plays that juxtaposed martyrdom with humour? Eckenstein entertained her readers with Hrotsvitha's plays, but her intellectual challenge remained significant: how could she convince readers of Hrotsvitha's genuineness when English-speaking scholars had not yet learned from the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) to assert the reality of language against historians' claims of a universal reality external to texts? In the modern age, the image of enclosed nuns was one marked by passivity, as acted upon rather than acting, and no one expected them to write with humour of any kind. Yet there was Hrotsvitha, in good translation on Eckenstein's page. In a sense, Eckenstein's lively use of example asked the general reading public to mediate between the universal realities found in traditional history books and the new voices of medieval women now brought to them. It is difficult to know the precise course that this process of reception took, but through questions posed to the public and, in time, to academic historians, figures like Hrotsvitha, who did not fit at all comfortably into any current historical synthesis, eventually received the attention they deserved. By a roundabout route, the picture drawn by women scholars of a few medieval women, and some groups of medieval women, came to challenge current interpretation of the Middle Ages.

If Eckenstein, Bateson, and Allen achieved eventual recognition — and found their works listed in medieval bibliographies and collected in libraries — women did not therefore move beyond the role of independent scholars. A few did, and the

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<sup>30</sup> Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism*, 172.

eventual acceptance of independent scholars' work may have helped open the doors of the academy to women scholars generally. A few women held tenured positions by mid-century: they were women like Helen Cam (1885-1968), who gladly spent a career as a Harvard University professor tracing the evolution of medieval English legal institutions. Eileen Power (1889-1940) began a lectureship at the London School of Economics as early as 1921 and rose in time to a professorship. Publishing *Medieval English Nunneries c.1275 to 1535* did not impede her academic progress but actually added to her prestige. Many other women had the credentials to take up teaching and research positions, yet some of them, like Margaret Wade Labarge, pursued topics related to medieval women while remaining independent scholars.

One of these, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), spoke of her future scholarly intentions at the early age of sixteen: "When I grow up I should like to be an author because you can influence people more widely by books than by pictures."<sup>31</sup> Her big book, *Mysticism* (1911), solved the problem of her exotic topic by way of an extensive introduction that washed the long course of Western mysticism clean of association with magic by means of a highly original interpretation based on psychological and theological insights. It invoked semiotics well before the study of symbolism and signs became integral to the practice of history. The second section of *Mysticism* introduced mystical writers whom she referred to as "pioneers" of humanity.<sup>32</sup> She viewed mysticism not as a contemplative art but rather as an activity and explained this in such a convincing manner that *Mysticism* transformed Underhill into a respected theologian with powerful sway in English society in her own day. Underhill spent her later career speaking to and leading religious groups and moved forward over the centuries in her scholarship to consider mystics in the early Protestant denominations. Scholar and practising mystic, Underhill shone in the recovery of very difficult medieval texts and, by including extracts, provided modern readers an entry point into *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) and the late fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing*. In *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, the critic John Macquarrie claims that Underhill is one of the few women to make a contribution to religious scholarship in the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> That contribution was based on explaining her medieval texts to readers, among them texts authored by women.

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31 Cropper, *Evelyn Underhill*, 6.

32 Quoted in Sauer, "Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)," 188.

33 Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, 408-409, cited in Greene, "Toward an Evaluation of the Thought of Evelyn Underhill," 549.

Underhill pursued her important project independently, its originality placing her work outside academic disciplinary categories.

Over the course of the twentieth century, new women's colleges in English universities and women's colleges in North America were in a position to include women medievalists in departments of history; nevertheless, independent scholars continued to carve out careers for themselves. The line is long and illustrious. Bertha Phillpotts (1877-1932) held the administrative position of librarian at Girton College and later served as secretary to Baron Anatole von Hügel, Curator of Local Archaeology at Cambridge University. These positions as well as some research fellowships allowed her to pursue her study of Icelandic literature with its important cast of female figures. Later she became principal of Westfield College, University of London. This administrative appointment provided Phillpotts with a living but severely limited her time for study and compromised her health. Nonetheless, her *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages and After*, published in 1913 by Cambridge University Press, became a classic. Moving far beyond Bachofen's social theory that had originally inspired Lina Eckenstein, Phillpotts found elements of matrilinearity as well as patrilinearity (the "spindle" and "spear" sides of a family) by tracing kindred ties from 'self' in medieval texts rather than only through lines of descent.<sup>34</sup> Featuring 'self' as definitional, with antecedents from both the spindle and spear sides of the family, produced a diagram of family and kin that was far different from the patriarchal lineage trees favoured in many medieval chronicles.<sup>35</sup> This acted as a corrective in the tracing of social origins; thus, in a sense she followed in the same path as Mary Bateson, who also refused to study descent lines in early medieval double monastic houses. One major effect of Phillpotts's work was to encourage re-definition of the concepts of *family* and *kindred* in early medieval Europe. Like Bateson, Phillpotts chose the early Middle Ages for her investigations because of her confident grasp of the sources, in this instance Norse texts.

Helen Waddell (1889-1965), with her first-class honours B.A. from Queen's University, Belfast, in 1911 and an M.A. thesis on Milton the year after, would spend much of her career as an independent scholar in the Queen's University library pursuing her studies. Initially, after her stepmother's death, Waddell had enrolled in Somerville

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34 Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages*, 142-43, and by the same author, "The Germanic Kindreds."

35 Phillpotts's largely descriptive work has been schematized by Lancaster, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society."

College, Oxford University, for the Ph.D. degree in order to shift her research to medieval love poems composed in Latin. While the *Carmina Burana* had been available to scholars since 1847, she appears to have been the first person to grasp the importance of the texts, immersing herself in “the literary furniture of [the wandering scholars’] minds” to the extent that she abandoned her Ph.D. and published her classic *The Wandering Scholars* in 1927.<sup>36</sup> Arbitrating skilfully between the “literary furniture” of medieval minds as revealed in these texts and the minds of her readers, Waddell proceeded to connect “action to its sense rather than behavior to its determinants,” in Clifford Geertz’s phrase, much like her predecessors among independent medieval scholars. Lyrical, highly detailed, and full of explanatory analogies to other literature from other times, her work avoided dull pedantry and earned Waddell an enthusiastic popular audience. Next, her *Peter Abelard, a Novel*, published in 1933, was a most improbable piece of scholarship. Despite her learning, Waddell published the work as a piece of fiction, and this may have cost her election to the British Academy.<sup>37</sup> Her work has continued to be judged as lacking in intellectual rigour, but no critic can gainsay the lyrical quality of her translations and prose or question her insights.<sup>38</sup> There was no place in the academy for Helen Waddell given what she desired to do with her medieval texts; defiant of academic norms, she fashioned her Abelard as fiction to escape criteria she found inimical.

On this side of the Atlantic, Mary Martin McLaughlin (1919-2006) was an independent scholar for much of her career. Teaching in her early years at the University of Nebraska and at Vassar College, McLaughlin was unemployed from 1967 onwards but fortunately possessed an inherited income. She also earned royalties from her *Portable Medieval Reader* (1949) and *Portable Renaissance Reader* (1953), both compiled with James Bruce Ross.<sup>39</sup> Her most serious scholarly work appeared near the end of her life, and her edited correspondence of Heloise and Abelard arrived posthumously in

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36 FitzGerald, “Helen Waddell (1889-1965),” 324 and 332 n. 9. FitzGerald cites a letter to Saintsbury, 24 October 1923, in the Waddell Papers, Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester, England.

37 FitzGerald, “Helen Waddell (1889-1965),” 328-29.

38 *Peter Abelard, a Novel* uses indentations to mark quoted poetry in translation and italics to indicate direct quotations. Other dialogue is plainly fiction. There are no footnotes and no bibliography to indicate Waddell’s learning. Nevertheless, the book went through at least twenty printings. Waddell claimed she lacked the capacity for precise translations.

39 Green, “Getting to the Source.”

2009 with the assistance of Bonnie Wheeler.<sup>40</sup> McLaughlin's former student and friend from her brief teaching years at Vassar College, Heath Dillard, followed a similar path and has spent a lifetime as an independent scholar. Her *Daughters of the Reconquest* (1984) opened the field of medieval Iberian history to the study of women.

The highly original voices encountered in the work of independent women scholars serve as an inspiration. These women saw no reason to be restricted to the terms of debate in current historiography, so these somewhat marginalized, but increasingly respected, independent scholars broke through barriers with their own interpretive insights. Their voices were personal, individualistic, and unassuming. Theirs were also the eccentric and, in many instances, highly innovative voices that introduced new interpretive dimensions into the study of history. These independent women scholars invented hermeneutic schemes without making any grandiose claims to a "new history," nor did they parade their sophisticated theoretical insights. Their interpretive tools are best recognized for what they accomplished rather than for what was claimed for them. These women wrote valuable histories while they stood outside the circle of eminent university medievalists, and frequently they presented their best efforts to a popular audience. Nevertheless, important new theoretical insights resulted from their work. They brought rare linguistic, palaeographic, philological, and interpretive skills to the task of informing the public about medieval women. Margaret Wade Labarge is in good company.

**Haverford College**

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40 McLaughlin and Wheeler, eds. & trans., *The Letters of Heloise and Abelard*. On McLaughlin's reviewing of scholarly literature, see Matter, "Mary Martin McLaughlin in Review." See also Newman, "Mary Martin McLaughlin, Always Independent"; Wheeler, "Clio's Silence"; and Cadden, "A Tribute to Mary Martin McLaughlin," all in *Medieval Feminist Forum* 42 (2006).

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