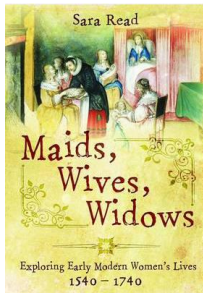


## **Maids, Wives, Widows: Exploring Early Modern Women's Lives 1540-1740**



Author: Sara Read  
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This is a very readable book which describes and celebrates aspects of the everyday lives of women in early modern history, ranging from women's work, literary women, through to women in public life, and includes a range of contemporary illustrations. The construct of chapters and range of subjects covered makes for easy access to topics of interest by the individual reader. The author tells us that she focuses on the seventeenth century in particular, which is evident in the overall balance of material used. Her occasional use of contemporary verse takes us seamlessly to the period.

Sara Read has given us a fresh insight into many everyday aspects of women's lives across Early Modern History. She illustrates that the vanity of women, in terms of clothes and fashion, was no different than today, albeit clothes in the time of her study were precious items, handed down within the family until they fell apart at the seams. She gives us an insight of the road travelled following the sixteenth-century break with Rome, to the relative multiplicity of Anglican and non-conformist forms of worship and the increasing role of women in ecclesiastic leadership.

The excesses of food and drink for the rich and scarcity of a balanced diet for the poor is described. Introduction of tea drinking and the first coffee-houses, and changes in drinking habits as men congregated there to gossip and read their newspapers, is discussed. Likewise the response of women who claimed that this craze for coffee drinking was making their men impotent. It gives the reader insights into changing society and the place of women in everyday life across 200 years. Unfortunately the long timescale covered means that it is not always possible to determine the exact historical context of the particular subject the author is discussing. She celebrates the literary women, some of whom wrote prodigiously in a time when the majority of women were unable to write.

More importantly perhaps, she has reminded us just how slowly women have travelled on their journey towards equality. Conversely, we see how some women, against all the odds, held their own in what was effectively 'a man's world' and paved the way to the legal, social, and political liberation of women in a time yet to come. This book is both an enjoyable read and, for those interested in the period, a useful reference to students.

This book is a welcome addition to the history of women in society.

Julia Allison, Honorary Professor, Division of Midwifery Studies, School of Medical Sciences, University of Nottingham.

**Review Editor's Note:** Although, as Julia draws out so clearly, *Maids, Wives, Widows* focuses on the daily life of women in all its richness during the 200 years it covers, it also contains two chapters which describe in general terms their experience of the reproductive cycle in more detail.