

Discovered Lives: Ladies of St Giles', Edinburgh 1587-1672

Rosalind K. Marshall

Rosalind K. Marshall Publishing, Edinburgh, 2019

ISBN: 978-1-5272-4717-8

£20.00

Copies of *Discovered Lives* may be ordered from Victoria-Arrowsmith Brown, 34 Hill Grove, Bristol, BS9 4RQ, email: arrowsmithbrown@blueyonder.co.uk, telephone 0117 940 6902. Cheques should be made payable to Dr R. K. Marshall, and all proceeds will go to St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh.



The fascinating lives of 49 post-Reformation women are explored in splendid detail in this beautifully illustrated book. What these women have in common is that they were unusual in being granted their own dedicated seats in St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh. Rosalind Marshall shows how, through their extraordinary lives, they came to achieve this remarkable form of recognition. The period following the Protestant Reformation, which this author terms 'ecclesiastical turmoil' (p. 123), has been well-addressed by historians interested in civil and religious strife, but the implications of these upheavals for women, their childbearing, their families and their relationships have not attracted the attention which they deserve. Despite, of necessity, drawing on a sample of affluent and indubitably privileged women, this book illuminates much-neglected human aspects of this calamitous period in the histories of Scotland and England.

That childbearing was a prominent feature of sixteenth- to seventeenth-century women's lives is too familiar to warrant comment, but Rosalind Marshall demonstrates the hugely personal implications of these women's fertility – or sometimes the lack of it, as faced by Jean Campbell, Viscountess Kenmure (p. 188). This is clear from the reactions of the women to their all-too-frequent losses through infant mortality; one example is Janet Johnston, Lady Curriehill (p. 126) who gave birth to eight sons, of whom only two survived. Despite the women belonging to the upper echelons of society, they were still vulnerable to dying in 'childbed'; such as Bethia Morrison, Lady Sweetheart (p. 137) and Margaret Winram (Mrs Stewart p. 141). Those attending the births, and sometimes the deaths, are also introduced, showing the wide-ranging practices of midwives and medical practitioners.

The complexities of women's lives, resulting in what may now be known as reconstituted or reconfigured families, are shown to be a longstanding phenomenon. Such complexity was only aggravated by the religious differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants, as well as political and civil strife between Parliamentarians and Royalists.

The minute detail of these women's financial transactions provides a fascinating picture of the limited power which they wielded. Often their tocher (dowry) was crucial to the continuation of a family line. Records of their finances relate to household outgoings, such as servants' wages, or to purchasing fashionable clothing, as in the case of Margaret Hay, Lady Innerpeffer (p. 175).

The women and their lives become more three-dimensional as the book progresses. While the latter sections may not quite deserve to be called 'bodice-rippers', the author shows the reader that these women's lives were far from dull. The escapades of Mary Erskine, Countess Marischal, in 1628, verge on a combination of *Annie Get your Gun* and *Whisky Galore*.

Rosalind Marshall focusses on an area in which fundamental human actions and reactions come to prominence. The interaction of politics, religion, dynastic ambition and armed conflict are presented from the viewpoint of the women who played crucial roles in these developments. This book represents a move away from the focus on government and royalty to the lives of women whose attributes may be less familiar but which now, as during their lifetimes, are deserving of recognition.

Rosemary Mander
Emeritus Professor of Midwifery
Formerly University of Edinburgh