

Women, land and property, then and now: an afterword

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The papers in this special issue make an important contribution to a growing body of work, which has in recent years coalesced to demonstrate that women made up a significant minority of landowners over the long period between the medieval period and nineteenth century.¹ Taken together, the papers examine women's engagement with diverse categories of property, from country estates to town houses, farms to plantations, debt to human property. In reading the papers, we move through a range of spaces at differing scales, from the geographies of empire to the intimate and everyday spaces of the home. In doing so, we explore not only the ways gender and property were co-constituted in Britain and the British colonies in the long eighteenth century, but also the sources feminist historians, historical geographers and literary scholars must work with in uncovering women's lives and experiences. Thus we encounter life writing, correspondence, account books, legal papers, poor rates, manorial surveys, probate records and novels, all while being reminded of the importance of thinking laterally through the source materials, many of which do not reflect directly on the questions we would most like to answer. In what follows, I explore some of the possibilities and prospects for developing research in this area, highlighting new directions and themes, as well as teasing out some of the wider implications of this persuasive and fascinating collection.

Several of the essays spotlight wealthy women, using correspondence, account books and estate papers to reveal the contributions these women made to managing their property and shaping both urban and rural landscapes. Sarah Shields offers detailed case studies of elite women managing landed estates and households, with a focus on the ways particular life course events – in this case, extended singleness – impacted on elite women's experiences of landed estate management. She examines single heiresses, but also unmarried women who acted as surrogate managers and chatelaines to brothers, brother-in-laws and nephews. Ultimately, singleness could be disadvantageous – not least because of established stereotypes about the usefulness or otherwise of 'old maids' – but it also offered control and independence in relation to property. Emma Purcell turns to married heiresses, focusing on the activities of Lady Mary Cardigan and her daughter, Elizabeth, Duchess of Buccleach. She uncovers new evidence that both women were active managers who exhibited control over multiple households. Like other propertied women, the Duchess of Buccleach offered careful financial oversight, keeping her own account books throughout her period of ownership using double entry bookkeeping as

well as insisting the house steward receive training in accounts.² Both women's agency in relation to their properties was fostered by companionate marriages to independently wealthy husbands, but was also carefully protected by legal arrangements. The receipts curated by Lady Cardigan and her husband offered "no clear gendered division of consumer responsibilities" – notably, a very different set up to the couples studied by Amanda Vickery – so that while the couple kept separate accounts, they also demonstrated collaborative decision making and the sharing of bills.³ As Purcell so clearly demonstrates, positive personal relationships were crucial here in offering women opportunities to manage and control property, just as married women subject to controlling or abusive husbands often lost control of their property and their purse strings.⁴

In her essay, Juliet Learmouth reminds us of wealthy women's role in shaping Britain's towns and cities during a period of vast urban change. She examines the agency of wealthy widows, single women and estranged wives in acquiring, managing and improving property within the Whitehall Palace site in London, as well as litigating over it. Much further down the social scale, Gillian Williamson examines the women providing private lodgings in their homes and thereby utilising residential property to generate an income to support themselves. These landladies showed a great deal of business acumen, negotiating terms and settling the rent, much as wealthier women running landed properties also did.⁵ Many landladies were single women of the middling sort, but married women also ran lodging houses. They most likely undertook a similar role within their enterprises, although – as Williamson notes – their work was often 'hidden' behind the householder's occupation beyond the home.

In his essay, Alexander Wakelam turns to a very different kind of property, but one with which some landladies were doubtless familiar – debt. Almost no women were declared bankrupt in eighteenth-century England, but debt imprisonment was a pre-trial process which could apply to wives and was thus far more common. It meant creditors could effectively force property ownership – of debt – on married women against their will, or at least use imprisonment as a means of ensuring the debt was paid. Separated couples sometimes signed legal agreements protecting husbands from their wives' debts – usually in exchange for a small annuity paid to the wife – but under coverture, wives could not contract with their husbands. This meant that separated women imprisoned for debt – usually incurred by them, but technically belonging to their husbands under coverture – might assert coverture as a solution to their circumstances, as for example did Mary Wells (a.k.a Mrs Sumbel).

Wakelam's work underlines the importance of thinking about who actually managed or controlled property, be that debt, land or residential buildings. As Joshua Rhodes argues in his essay, landholding was a very different thing to landownership, with the former having received far less academic attention than the latter. Modern non-governmental organisations define landholders as "the manager of the holding": that is, the individual with "responsibilities in production".⁶ In the eighteenth-century countryside, this meant the farmer of the land, who might be either the tenant of the landowner or the tenant's subtenant. Rhodes's study uses poor rates and manorial surveys to reconstruct landholding histories in Puddletown, Dorset, over the century from c. 1700. Two key points emerge from this detailed longitudinal analysis, both worthy of further attention in future studies.

Firstly, in comparing men's and women's experience as occupiers of the land, Rhodes demonstrates that women farmed smaller holdings than men, held them for less long, and were less likely to increase the size of their farms over time. But age mattered: young widows' experiences more closely mirrored that of younger men, while older widows were more likely to scale back landholding in much the same way as did older men. Secondly, in Puddletown at least, there was a rapid fall in the scale of women's landholding across the eighteenth century, from 5 per cent in 1702 to just 1 per cent in 1843. As Rhodes puts it, this was a story about the "decline and exclusion" of female landholders which contrasts sharply with our understandings that women's landownership was relatively stable throughout the long period from c. 1500 to c. 1900. The tithe surveys indicate that female landholding in Puddletown was fairly typical of Dorset more generally, though more work is needed to further explore women's (potentially) differing experiences of landownership and landholding, and to know if the precipitous decline in women's landholding occurred more generally than this Dorset community. I look forward to hearing more on this from Rhodes and others in the future.

Rhodes's insistence that age mattered in relation to women's experiences of tenanted property reminds us about the importance of looking beyond gender as the primary characteristic shaping women's experiences. Several of the other essays also underline the importance of thinking in an intersectional way. Shields, for example, argues that for the unmarried female landowners in her study, religion as well as gender mattered in securing local authority. She also notes that while single women's status as *feme sole* gave them legal rights in relation to their property, being unmarried also meant that they were subject to a perceived weakness

which might, on occasion, leave them vulnerable to grasping relations. Williamson too highlights the ways the intersections of class and gender worked to shape gendered attitudes towards Georgian landladies as common, grasping and mercenary, “deeply-engrained stereotypes” that were evident in lodgers’ letters and diaries as well as in fiction.

In her essay, Victoria Barnett Woods explores the intersections of race, gender and slavery as they relate to women and property in the British Caribbean. She lays out key points of legal difference between Britain and the British Caribbean, not least that enslaved people were property, a situation further complicated when the person inheriting was of mixed heritage, typically the ‘natural’ daughter of a white plantation owner and an (enslaved) woman of colour. Thus, for example, it was possible on the death of a plantation owner for his natural daughter to be both manumitted – given herself *as* property – and inherit land and enslaved people at her father’s death, as happened to Dorothy Bennett. At the same time, owning land and enslaved people offered social mobility and financial security to daughters who inherited. Women like Judith Philip of Grenada, for example, grew rich as a result of their prudent management of plantation estates – including land and human property – even whilst they were themselves descended from enslaved people. Barnett Woods examines the ways that race complicated mixed-heritage women’s attempts to “navigate the rough terrain of sexual inequality”, a double disadvantage that cuts across and usefully destabilizes Sarah Chapone’s (1735) simple comparison – touched upon in Wakelam’s essay – that “the Estate of Wives is more disadvantageous [sic] than Slavery”.⁷

Like the heiresses featured in Barnett Woods’ essay, the protagonists in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* benefitted from enslaved labour on their Caribbean estate. As Rita Dashwood notes, novels like *Mansfield Park* do important work in “explor[ing] anxieties surrounding women’s relationships to property”, just as the fictional accounts of Georgian landladies were both reflective of, and themselves generative of, eighteenth-century views of women and property. Dashwood offers a new reading of the novel in which Fanny Price’s journey from the periphery to the centre is one of both increasing repression and growing complicity in the morally reprehensible system of ownership and management in evidence on Sir Thomas Bertram’s estates in England and Antigua. In this sense, Fanny’s journey is less an emancipation than an assimilation, so that Fanny – though not Austen, who Dashwood argues exhibited critical detachment from her (flawed) heroine – ultimately submits to both patriarchal control and the moral corruption of the transatlantic property system. Unlike Barnett Woods

mixed-heritage heiresses, white women – even of relatively modest backgrounds like Fanny Price – doubtless benefitted from their class and family connections if not as a result of their gender.

Conclusion

In the final chapter of *Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape*, I argued that to repeat largely unexamined assumptions that all landowners were men, that propertied women were exceptional, and that estate management was gender blind was to ignore the multiple and overlapping ways in which gender shaped early modern society. It was also to imply that “women’s lives do not matter, that their experiences, concerns and contributions are irrelevant to bigger historical narratives”. Crucially, histories that fail to recognise women’s contributions have material consequences in the twenty-first century “however micro the aggression”.⁸ The text for the final chapter of the book was written in the summer of 2016 and while I attempted to cite as much of the brilliant existing work by feminist historians and historical geographers as I could in my book, I’m also delighted to note how much has changed on the theme of women and property in the intervening few years. Special issues like these are a good indication of the vigour of the field and the new ideas, evidence and research directions that are now emerging at pace.

Far less heartening is the realisation that in many ways, little has changed as regards women and property since the eighteenth century. Gender gaps in ownership of and access to land and other property persist in the UK, Europe and North America.⁹ The United Nations estimates that women make up 10 to 15 per cent of agricultural landholders in much of Northern Europe and the USA, while the Swedish International Cooperation Agency estimates that between 10 and 20 per cent of landholders in developing countries are women.¹⁰ As colleagues and I have observed elsewhere, this is a figure remarkably consistent with what we know of women’s landholding and ownership in early modern and eighteenth-century England.¹¹ Centuries of gender inequality regarding property have long-term consequences today, not least because early modern English property relations were transported to many areas of the world under British colonialism and imperialism. This is why these feminist and critical histories and historical geographies are crucially important today – they help us to understand gendered property relations as we encounter them in the contemporary world, as well as demonstrating the distance we still have to go in addressing ‘the gender gap’ as it relates to land and property.

¹ See B. McDonagh, A. L. Capern, J. Aston and H. Worthen, 'Women, Property and Land' in A. L. Capern, B. McDonagh and J. Aston, *Women and the Land, 1500-1900* (Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 1-28, for a summary of the literature here.

² B. McDonagh, 'On Being 'fully and completely mistress of the whole business': Gender, Land and Estate Accounting in Georgian England', in A. L. Capern, B. McDonagh and J. Aston, *Women and the Land, 1500-1900* (Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 149-75.

³ A. Vickery, 'His and hers: Gender, consumption and accounting in 18th century England', *Past and Present* 1, sup. 1 (2006), 12-38.

⁴ See for example, the experiences of Elizabeth Knight, Susanna Strangways Horner and Mary Eleanor Bowes (later Stoney), Countess of Strathmore, as described in B. McDonagh, *Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape, 1700-1830* (Routledge, 2017), 22-23, 54 and 106.

⁵ McDonagh, *Elite Women*, 39-69.

⁶ FAOUN, 'Gender and Land Statistics: Recent Developments in FAO's Gender and Land Rights Database', p. vi, available at <http://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/data-map/en/>, accessed 26 June 2019; cited in McDonagh *et al.*, 'Women, Property and Land', 18.

⁷ While it reads today as a problematic appropriation of enslaved people's experiences by early (mainly white) feminists, the trope equating marriage and slavery first emerged in the seventeenth century and had become common in polemical tracts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its actual basis in law was unclear, however. As Patricia Crawford notes, married women's ownership of their person and body was not consistently expressed in the common law but the combination of coverture and the lack of options to prosecute marital violence or rape meant married women often struggled to assert their own property in themselves in common law courts (P. Crawford, 'Women and Property: Women as Property', *Parergon* 19.1 (2002), 151-171, 158 and 162), even whilst the equity and church courts offered other options for married women to assert property outside of common law, including in themselves.

⁸ McDonagh, *Elite Women*, 164.

⁹ McDonagh *et al.*, *Women and the Land*, 21.

¹⁰ SIDA, 'Women and Land Rights', March 2015, available at <https://www.sida.se/contentassets/1cc2e9756fd04d80bba64d0d635fe158/women-and-land-rights.pdf>, accessed 26 June 2019.

¹¹ See McDonagh *et al.*, *Women and the Land*, 18.