

*Final draft*

The Working Life of Women in the 17th Century

In the absence of any largely conceived and philosophically treated history of the part women have taken in the development of the world's civilization, such studies as Alice Clark's "Working Life of Women in the 17th Century" are particularly important.

In the first place it is on such detailed documents as Miss Clark presents that the future generalizations of the history for which we are all looking must be based. Then--and this is important--they bring woman out of the misty place where false generalizations, largely concocted for the sake of propagandum of one sort or another, have thrust her. They show her to us as something beside an impotent, submissive dependent in the work of the world; demonstrate the fact that she is, and has always been, a lusty, practical, indefatigable factor in the carrying on of life, that no matter what the organization for production in a period considered has been, you find her taking her full share while at the same time she has been fulfilling the higher purposes of her being, carrying on the race and creating a home for the spiritual development of her child.

Miss Clark is not dogmatic in her generalizations from the very substantial bulk of material that she has brought together. She present it as a record of activities, of the actual things that women did in the 17th Century in productive industry. And it certainly is a busy person that she presents. She shows us the

women of the aristocracy managing estates and often making up for the squanderings of irresponsible and rakish husbands and sons; engaging successfully in various trades and businesses; going after patents, and taking advantage in a most modern way of every business opportunity that presented itself. The picture reads very much like the partnership that one finds so common in the France of today between women and their husbands. The woman's contribution to the agricultural development of 17th Century England is even more important. She was the very backbone of the textile industry, doing the spinning of all England, whether the organization was domestic, family or capitalistic. In the crafts and guilds it was recognized that she should be allowed to take her husband's place when he was incapacitated or died. That is, in all of the more highly developed industrial life she was an energetic, recognized factor. When you drop below this into the ranks of the wage earner, you find her everywhere, valiantly struggling through poverty and disease, habitually overworking, and often making a spirited fight for betterment of her position and for protection in what she conceives to be her rights. The details which Miss Clark heaps up demonstrate the enormous contribution to the wealth of the nation which women were making in this period, both inside and outside of the family; and she makes this, it must be remembered, in spite of serious handicaps. Very rarely indeed did she have the training for executive or craft work that was accorded the man. As a wage earner, it went unquestioned in the 17th Century that her wage

Digital Image, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelleter Library

should be lower, that her food ration should be less, that she could not ask so good a house or expect to have the same privileges; that is, all her working life was carried on on the theory that she was the less important sex and therefore the one to receive the lesser share. The necessity of preserving the men for the sake of protecting the nation, the teaching of religion, the natural spirit of domination in men and the equally naturally submissive spirit of women--were all factors in establishing this theory of her lesser importance. Such studies as Miss Clark's, bringing into light the immense service that woman has so quietly rendered in the development of the world, does much to prove the absurdity of the accepted notions about her place. Such a record of achievement as this work shows cannot but help undermine the long accepted view of the inferiority of her contribution to the developing of civilization. The outstanding impression is of a figure that, whatever the disaster, could be trusted to carry on.

While the study gives ample material for this placing of the average woman of three hundred years ago in a niche much more nearly on the level with that of man than has generally been accorded her, it brings her very close to the woman of the present day. The activities of the working women of the 17th Century were very like those of the 20th; it is likeness not difference that the book demonstrates. In spite of all the changes in industrial life, there still persists, at least in this country, the domestic and family as well as capitalistic forms of industry.

Women today in the United States are making enormous contributions to the production of the country in domestic pursuits. It is not only directly by gardening, canning and sewing but through the important contribution of managing the family budget--a matter quite as important in the family as it is in a business. The family as an industrial unit still exists; and not only exists but at certain points is actually on the increase. We hear in the 17th Century of the earnings of all the members being turned in and again and again saved in order to begin an independent business in which all members will be concerned. We have more than one great industrial establishment in this country that is run largely on family lines, no one but members of the family being admitted.

It is in the capitalistic organization of society that the woman, in the United States at least, is coming rapidly into a position very far in advance of that which she occupied at the start of the system. Equality in her treatment as a wage earner, if not universally is widely recognized and practiced in many industries. Training is accorded her in almost every craft and trade. Executive positions are becoming more and more open to her and slowly, though surely, she is taking her place as she is showing her ability, as the responsible head, both financially and managerially, of all sorts of industries; that is, she is beginning in this country to approach to something of

of the place that she has long taken in France. Thus the handicaps which the women of the 17th Century suffered through the coming of the capitalistic organization have begun to give way.

It should be noted that this present study has been made possible by the intelligent generosity of Mrs. Bernard Shaw, who has established a scholarship to assist those who wish to investigate particularly the past economic conditions of women. Materials which help to establish the tremendous contribution that women have always made to the economic development of the world are of the real value in bringing about anything like her real emancipation. The tendency has been to slight her historic place in the development of civilization. What we need is an authoritative picture of what this place has been. Such work as Miss Clark's helps enormously in the creation of this picture.

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