Remember When We Couldn't See the Women?

Jacqueline Murray

When I started to reflect back on the influence and contributions of Sue Stuard to medieval history, and more specifically to the history of women in the Middle Ages, I was struck by the fact that for as long as most of us have been able to pursue research on women, Sue has been there. I can just barely remember a time before she was an abiding presence, scholarly guide, mentor, and role model. It just seems like Sue has always been here; always been answering questions before they were asked, always providing leadership in a field that is notoriously and appropriately unconstrained. She displays, to my mind, not only the qualities of a pioneer and a leader, but also of a sage, of a wise woman. And I think we will be better able to see and to appreciate fully Sue's astonishing contribution if we look back a bit at the history of our field.

In the early years of Second Wave Feminism, women's history was a very different field, sparse, perhaps almost parched. Never mind "add women and stir" history—no one wanted to take the lid off the pot, never mind introduce new ingredients to the mix. I remember being in the second year of my undergrad in 1974 and taking the most groundbreaking, the most cutting-edge, the most thrilling course ever: Women's Studies. Imagine! One whole course, for one whole semester, devoted to women: women and politics, women and literature, women and economics, the sociology of women, women and the family, and—of course—women in history. For two weeks we examined women in a variety of historical contexts, but primarily from Victorian England and post-Confederation (1967) Canada. There was no text book. Rather the five co-teachers—each incidentally teaching voluntarily, over and above her normal course load (a strategy still used all too frequently to get women into the curriculum)—handed out the pre-Xerox machine versions of photocopies. The course was controversial and no one knew if we would actually

get academic credit for it [in the end, I did get a generalized "undesignated liberal arts" credit]. This may seem incredible, even ludicrous, in this era of centers and departments and doctorates in Women's Studies, but those are our roots and it really wasn't all that long ago. It is good to remember just how humble were our beginnings.

The next year I was able to take an "experimental" course on the history of the family, which logically enough included some discussion of women. I will never forget Ruth Schwartz Cowan's study of how the washing machine contributed to increasing the workload of house wives, a wonderful example of the importance of leaving behind our assumptions.[1] For me, the next step was devouring two essay collections, *Clio's Consciousness Raised* and *Suffer and Be Still*; the titles alone tell us something about the early approaches to women's history.[2] Those two collections, however, coupled with the heady effects of reading every issue of *MS Magazine* hitherto published, emboldened me so that in 1975, I was brash enough to propose to my supervisor that I write a Honours Thesis on some aspect of women in the Middle Ages. I give tremendous credit to Janos Bak, an historian of kings and empires and political institutions, for not only agreeing but for helping to identify an excellent primary source, *Las siete partidas* of Alfonso the Wise. On the question of secondary literature, on an analytical and interpretive framework, however, I was pretty much on my own. Then I found the work of those early historians of medieval women, Lina Eckenstein and Eileen Power, one's acidic paper already mouldering, the other's 50-year-old work just edited and released as a brilliantly coloured peacock, more pamphlet really than monograph.[3] These works kept me going, but barely. Then, roughly halfway through the academic year, with lots of research, some writing, and little insight under my belt, *Women in Medieval Society* burst onto the scene.[4] It was like having the feminist cavalry come to the rescue, Sue leading the way with an elite phalanx of medievalists in her wake, opening up a research field and a chronological period that was so fresh and so energizing that it almost made me giddy. (Apologies for the military metaphor—but that, too,

is emblematic of the mid-1970s.) I still have my copy of *Women in Medieval Society*: it is like a grand dame on my bookshelf, its sombre muted cover with the weighty female statuary conveying a certain *gravitas* and permanence, while the boldness and freshness of the contents is reflected in the playful fuschia lettering.

I wish I could say that *Women in Medieval Society* changed everything but it's not that simple: it did and it didn't. With the help of Sue and the volume's authors, I finished my honours thesis—and defended it before three old-fashioned medievalists. In graduate school, however, women's history was still not quite respectable and I was pressed to write a dissertation on marriage and the family. At least that would make me employable. But, with *Women in Medieval Society* Sue (and the others) really did initiate a profound change and the study of women in the Middle Ages became both more respectable and easier to pursue. And it is not without significance (in my mind at least) that that same doctoral supervisor, who pressed me into a marriage and family topic, also attended one particularly favoured Berks and introduced me to Sue (and three or four of the contributors to *WMS*), and he very much enjoyed walking with these feminists. It was an almost symbolic changing of the guard. The older school of social history giving way to the newer: by the late 1980s, women's history and women historians were assuming a leadership role and a mentoring function that would transform the academy thoroughly and profoundly throughout the 1990s.

And Sue was there through it all. One of her great strengths as a scholar, that has enabled her to make such a profound contribution to all of us as medievalists and feminists, is that she is an historian's historian. Her scholarship is deep and impeccable and withstands the scrutiny of hostile critics. Yet she also has always worn her heart on her sleeve—her interest in the history of women has been neither disguised nor sanitized. She has always worked from a feminist perspective and been explicit about it. This struck me most profoundly as I reread her 1981 critique of the *Annales* school.[5] Throughout this article, which I find to be as timely today as it was 25 years ago, Sue consistently refers to feminists and feminist historians in particular. She

is not afraid of the "F word" either as a personal label or as an interpretative stance, and she is clear in her assertion of the importance of a feminist perspective to the enterprise of women's history.

Sue has been steadfast in her pursuit of women's history. She has not drifted to gender studies or been lured by queer theory or placed herself in other schools or under other rubrics that are less than feminist or do not keep women at the centre of the research agenda. This is an issue she addressed in "The Chase After Theory" in the early 1990s.[6] In this article, Sue reminds us that theory is not something new to historians. Theory rather is a necessity for the study of women in the Middle Ages and that looking to earlier historians, historians that we now identify as foremothers but who were long neglected in the 1990s, we can see how their historical interpretation led to theoretical insights. So, although an historian who has most recently studied medieval fashion, Sue is not an historian who is lured by academic fashion. Her allegiance to her early work, *Women in Medieval Society*, reflects a steadfastness and awareness of purpose that accounts for the endurance of her scholarship. This is, I think, one of the reasons why Sue's work, whether it is from the 1970s or the 1980s or the 1990s or from this millennium, retains a freshness and an immediacy.

Sue is very much someone who has lived her professional life in "the community of scholars," her colleagues, new scholars and those who have gone before. She honours the First Wave historians who set the groundwork for us. Nothing illustrates this more than the fact that Eleanor Shipley Duckett figures in the introduction to *Women in Medieval Society* (1976), in "The Chase After Theory" (1992), and again in Sue's essay about her in *Women Medievalists and the Academy* (2005).[7] Sue is, too, very much a mentor, role model, and friend to dozens of feminist medievalists. Countless numbers of us have benefited from her generosity—personal as well as professional. I can say that I owe her much of my career success; I am sure others here would echo that sentiment.

In closing, I will expose my own romantic nature in a way that I hope is not displeasing. I rather think that Sue sees all of us feminists and historians of medieval women rather akin to Christine de Pisan's City of Ladies, marching together through time, honouring our scholarly foremothers, linking arms and sharing strength and wisdom with each other, and with a generosity of mind and spirit, mentoring those who will succeed us in what still remains a great enterprise that well fits under the canopy of *Women in Medieval Society*.

University of Guelph

End Notes

1. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "A Case Study of Technological and Social Change: The Washing Machine and the Working Wife," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised. New Perspectives on the History of Women*, ed. Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner (New York: Harper, 1974), pp. 245-53.
2. *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, cited above, and *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972).
3. Lina Eckenstein, *Woman Under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between AD 500 and AD 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1896); Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975).
4. *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1976).
5. Susan Mosher Stuard, "The *Annales* School and Feminist History: Opening Dialogue with the American Stepchild," *Signs* 7 (1981): 135-43.
6. Susan Mosher Stuard, "The Chase After Theory: Considering Medieval Women," *Gender & History* 4.2 (1991): 133-46.
7. "Eleanor Shipley Duckett (1880-1076): Historian of the Latin Middle Ages," *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Madison: U Wisconsin P, 2005), pp. 955-68.