

Isabelle Devos, Julie de Groot and Ariadne Schmidt (eds.), *Single life and the city, 1200-1900*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). 260 p. ISBN 9781137406392.

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When Judith Bennett and Amy Froide's *Single women in the European past, 1250-1800* was published in 1998, it was the first of its kind, a book dedicated to the history of unmarried women, even though many historians vigorously asserted that such a group never existed.<sup>1</sup> In the nineteen years since, rather than the landslide of publications one might have anticipated with the opening up of a new field of study, publications on single women have slowly trickled in, while almost nothing has been written on the subject of single men. *Single life and the city, 1200-1900* hopes to reset the trajectory initiated by Bennett and Froide, but within a more nuanced framework by tying singleness (both male and female) to the urban environment where rates of singleness rose steeply throughout the period and shaped the experience of single living. In doing so, this remarkable collection includes studies from cities both large and small across northwestern Europe: Bruges, Flanders, Mechelen (BE); Briançon, Grenoble, Lyon (FR); Lindköping, Norrköping, Vadstena, Söderköping (SE); Bridgnorth, London, and Paisley (GB). It also pursues three distinct themes: 1) constraints and opportunities for singletons; 2) group experiences and particularities (with lots of room for heterogeneity); and 3) the home and material culture of single life.

A number of chapters stands out from the rest. Peter Stabel's study of single women in late medieval Flanders challenges the place of the Black Death in the economic history of singleness. While the era after the Black Death has long been marked by some historians as a golden age for women, caused by a fundamental shift in labor markets that permitted women expanded participation in the work force and enabled them to postpone marriage, Stabel explains that the documentary evidence indicates otherwise. Rather, in Flanders, this period saw a drastic reduction in women's opportunities, as they were pushed out of the better remunerated positions in Flanders' cloth manufacturing industry.

P.J.P. Goldberg's chapter on single men in later medieval England reveals that they shared much in common with single women. Like single women, single men were also heavily concentrated in low paying/low status positions, such as domestic service and day labor. In terms of living experiences, we see what Goldberg describes as 'bachelor clustering', akin to the phenomenon of 'spinster clustering' evidenced among single women. Authorities were equally as panicked about single men living together and passed municipal regulations to suppress bachelor

1 J.M. Bennett and A.M. Froide, *Singlewomen in the European past, 1250-1800* (Philadelphia 1998).

clustering and profession-related devotional guilds in which bachelors might organize themselves into a collective.

Finally, in her analysis of beguine wills from sixteenth-century Mechelen, Kim Overlaet demonstrates how little we really understand about beguine culture. Seeing beguine households very much as female craft guilds, she explains the astonishing economic possibilities opened up for women by the beguine lifestyle that allowed women to earn enough money to lead lives of substance and perpetuate the beguine existence through bequests to adult nieces who hoped to join beguinages.

A number of motifs reappear time and again. Contributions by Stabel, Overlaet, Anne Montenach, Wendy Gordon, and Maja Machant underscore the integral nature of the textile industries as the locus for women's job opportunities. Owen Hufton's 'economy of makeshift', in which women implement a variety of creative survival strategies in order to make ends meet, played a key part in chapters by Montenach, Gordon, Mechant, David Hussey and Margaret Ponsonby, affording the reader an opportunity to see women piece together an existence through work in established industries relating to food production, clothing manufacture, and hospitality, as well as the underground work force of prostitution and the black market. Montenach's research into the role of women in the black market for meat during Lent was particularly energizing. The underlying theme throughout much of the book is that '[s]ingleness was simply not an automatic sentence to poverty' (18). Chapters by Overlaet, Inneke Baatsen, Julie de Groot, Isis Sturtewagen, and Jon Stobart especially confirm that 'a considerable share of "urban singles" was able to manage a household that could meet expectations of married and widowed households' (197).

Despite the broad appeal of the subject matter, some of the contributions within this collection fail to make their work accessible to those outside the discipline of demography. Here, Dag Lindström's chapter on unmarried adults in Swedish towns is a prime example. Nevertheless, *Single life and the city, 1200-1900* is a welcome addition to the field, boasting an array of chapters touching on regions (Sweden, Belgium) and subjects (single men, material culture) that are dismally understudied.

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