



PROJECT MUSE®

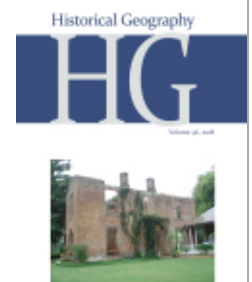
Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape, 1700–1830 by
Briony McDonagh (review)

Ruth Larsen

Historical Geography, Volume 46, 2018, pp. 333–335 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hgo.2018.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/723725>

Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape, 1700–1830. Briony McDonagh. London: Routledge, 2018. Pp. xii+190, illustrations, appendix, glossary, index. \$140.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4094-5602-5.

Briony McDonagh's excellent new book explores the roles of women as property owners, managers, and improvers. Although there has been a growth in gender history and in the study of the lives of elite women, surprisingly little work has been done on their interactions with the rural landscape. By taking a feminist historical geography approach, *Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape, 1700–1830* highlights how women could be important agents within the social and economic worlds of rural Britain.

McDonagh considers three particular issues. First, she explores the extent of female landownership in the eighteenth century. The mechanisms that enabled women to hold property are discussed, and it is shown that despite legal practices such as coverture and primogeniture, which limited female landownership, being a property owner was not just the preserve of single women and widows. McDonagh notes that approximately a fifth of marriages within Britain resulted in female heiresses during the eighteenth century, and that a number of these women used marriage settlements to enable them to hold their inheritances as separate estates. This meant that there were a small but significant number of women who owned property. Through careful analysis of parliamentary enclosure awards from the "Central Province," McDonagh suggests that 10 percent of land was owned by women, either on their own or jointly with other parties. While these documents do not provide a definitive national picture, by covering a quarter of a million acres it is a significant sample. This research not only gives us a new understanding of the degree of female landholding but also challenges the traditional presumption that property was "defeminized" after 1700.

Second, the practical elements are considered and McDonagh discusses the variety of different roles that over seventy women from across Great Britain played in landownership and agricultural estate management. Some took great interest in the accounts; Elizabeth Somerset, duchess of Beaufort, took advice from other landholders when overseeing a review of the accounting system. It was not just women who were the legal landowners that engaged in estate management. Elizabeth Leveson-Gower, countess of Sutherland, directly managed the Highland

estate that she had inherited from her father, although it was legally the possession of her husband, Earl Gower. It was she who drove the 1807 Sutherland clearances. Other women made more charitable interventions. In the chapter on the country house and its associated estate, McDonagh moves beyond the traditional focus on the domestic interior and considers instead the ways that women used the estates to support the local community. This included the building of schools, churches, and almshouses as well as using the land to provide affordable foodstuffs to tenants, as Elizabeth Prowse did at Wicken. Whether it was for charity or for increased profit, it did benefit the elite family. As McDonagh and a growing number of other writers have shown, women were as important as their husbands, fathers and brothers in the “powerhouse.”

The final main theme of the book is how women were perceived as landowners. By utilizing a mixture of published and private writings, McDonagh demonstrates how women were often proud of their work as land managers. Elizabeth Montagu, for example, described herself as having a “genius for farming.” The final chapter also explores how essays written by women were published in volumes such as the *Annals of Agriculture* reflecting how women were able to proactively engage in the growing public discourse on agricultural improvement, connecting with wider scholarship on intellectual communities in Enlightenment England and Scotland. However, prevailing gender ideals did play some role in the way that female land management was perceived, especially in memorials, where the focus tended to be on the domestic rather than agricultural roles of the women commemorated. However, some women did develop their own roles outside of societal expectations. Although Anne Lister, for example, managed to utilize her femininity to gain access to her competitor’s mines, something that she probably would not have been able to do as a man, she went beyond traditional feminine ideals by not just being closely concerned with the pits on her Halifax estates. She also had some oversight of those of her neighboring landholder and “wife,” Ann Walker.

Clearly written and based upon excellent scholarship, this volume is of interest to those engaged with issues of class, gender, law, landscape, and economics. Undergraduate students in particular will not only enjoy its focused structure but will also benefit from seeing how to clearly lay out an argument, something that is not always the case in other monographs. It is also a great example of how to employ a wide range

of different sources. In addition to the enclosure papers that form the basis of the quantitative elements of the book, maps, legal documents, account books, memoirs, letters, notebooks, estate papers, material culture, and published writings have all been consulted. This means that this book genuinely brings together historical and geographical approaches to research to the benefit of both scholarly communities. There are some points, though, where maybe a more questioning approach to these sources may have been useful. For example, there could have been some discussions about whether enclosure records disproportionately include one gender, class, or group more than any others. There are also times where there could have been further explicit discussion of issues of continuity and change as well as differences and similarities in the national experience. It is a book that leaves you wanting more; many of the different elements of the book would be worthy of a full-length study in themselves, especially the brief section on women landownership in literature. This, though, is its strength. It covers new ground and provides new questions to be considered, as the author notes herself in the conclusion. As one would hope from a historical geographer, McDonagh has provided an excellent, clear map. I believe it will guide future scholarship in this area for a number of years.

Ruth Larsen,
University of Derby

Remapping Modern Germany after National Socialism, 1945–1961.

Matthew D. Mingus. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017. Pp. xii+208, black & white illustrations, maps, notes. \$55.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-8156-3550-5. \$24.95, paperback, ISBN 978-0-8156-3538-3.

Matthew D. Mingus brings a historian's appreciation of German geography and the geography of Germany to illustrate geography's importance beyond any implied provincialism of European studies. As he attests, the unfolding relationship between the two constitutes a driving engine behind a wide array of historical and political narratives and analysis: from the broader origins of cartography and geography, to the most systematic ethnic cleansing in history, the front lines of the Cold War, or the current geopolitical viability of the European Union. In this regard, despite an early optimism that the world had cleared a