Lady Rachel Russell
Schwoerer, Lois G.

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Lady Rachel Russell: "One of the Best of Women".

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Introduction

“One of the best of women” was the way a contemporary described Lady Rachel Russell (1637-1723). During her lifetime, Lady Russell enjoyed the respect and affection of both men and women. In 1773, fifty years after her death, the appearance of a portion of her letters revived admiring interest in her as the pious mourner of a martyr, her husband, Lord Russell. In the nineteenth century, the publication of more of her letters and several flattering biographies confirmed her reputation for religious piety and devotion to husband and family. In the late twentieth century, however, Lady Russell has virtually faded from view. This book, the first comprehensive and fully documented account of her life, aims to vivify her character and personality, to amplify nineteenth-century biographies, and to illuminate thereby aristocratic female culture in late-Stuart England.

I was first attracted to Lady Russell years ago by the remark of an eighteenth-century historian, Sir John Dalrymple. In concluding his account of the execution of Lady Russell’s husband for high treason in 1683, Dalrymple wrote, “Lord and Lady Russell parted forever; he great in this last action of his life, but she greater.” This arresting remark, advancing a wife beyond her husband, appeared without further comment or explanation. Such a woman, I thought, merits attention. At about the same time I was reading Dalrymple, I had several conversations with the late Catherine Drinker Bowen, a prize-winning biographer. This vigorous, intelligent woman held biography in high regard and wrote about it as a “calling.” She talked about some of the challenges and rewards of working in the biographical mode, left me under no illusion about the difficulties involved, and encouraged me to hope that I would write a biography one day. But other projects claimed priority, and it was not until 1982 that I returned to Lady Russell. By then women’s history was well established. The work of Natalie Davis, Joan Kelly, and Hilda Smith, among many others, opened up new questions for me and identified new materials for the study of women. I am indebted to these historians. Had I written this biography earlier, it would have taken a different form.

Historians of women have shown little interest in biography, especially that of aristocratic ladies. Impatient with the “great man” theory of history, which excluded women, devoted to the effort to recover
women from all classes, and engaged in exploring new methodologies and materials, they have tended to dismiss studies of “women worthies” as outdated. Yet, there are few serious biographies of late-Stuart women, except for queens; until there are, women will remain as faceless as they always have been and our understanding of the past will remain incomplete and one-sided. Biography vivifies an individual as no other approach can. We need biographies of women to match those of men. Furthermore, the biographical mode may illuminate general questions about female experience even though sufficient material to write a biography almost never survives for a typical woman. Biography permits the historian to transcend the data provided by law, custom, and prescriptive literature (which was written mostly by men) and draw a more accurate picture of the actual experiences and attitudes of and towards women. The excuse that women in the late-Stuart period have not found biographers because of a dearth of material will probably prove to be ill-founded when English archives are systematically explored with the intention of discovering neglected or uncatalogued letters and papers.

A concept of historians of women’s history which I have found useful and made my own is that of the “doubled vision,” as Joan Kelly put it. Kelly called on historians to keep one eye on men and the other on women, so that their perspective on the past would be all-encompassing. In keeping with that principle, this book has given more attention than might be expected to Rachel’s husband. Treating Rachel and William together helps us to understand each of them better. The absence of Lord Russell’s political papers, almost certainly destroyed at the time of his arrest, makes it impossible to undertake a full-scale treatment of him. However, in the context of Rachel’s life one can take a closer look at his personality, political and religious views, and role as leader of the Country-Whig opposition in the House of Commons at the time of the Exclusion Crisis. By so doing, this study refines understanding of the principles and tactics of the Whigs. It also shows the subsidiary role that a woman might play in “high politics.” Rachel was William’s “informer,” as she herself put it, and his counsellor during his parliamentary career. She took a central part in his trial and preparations for death, and played a major role in transforming him into a martyr and casting herself as mourner. Accordingly, two chapters of this book give extensive treatment to his political career, trial, and execution, events that were traumatic for Rachel.

Lady Rachel Russell’s life was richer and more complex than the customary view of women of her era would suggest was possible. The traditional ideal confined women to the private sphere, made them subordinate to men as daughters, wives, and mothers, and stripped them of a public role. But Rachel’s class, personal qualities, and protracted
widowhood enabled her to circumvent some of the restraints imposed on all women in the period. A member of the English aristocracy by birth and marriage, she was also connected through her mother to the highest reaches of French Huguenot society. Her class gave her wealth, a passably good education, leisure, and opportunities for a self-indulgent social life when she was a young woman and for study, reflection, and writing later on, especially during her long widowhood. These advantages of class contributed to her sense of self-confidence and self-worth, while the men in her family who held high political office gave her access to the centers of political and religious power. Rachel’s experience invites historians of women to consider more seriously the advantages of class and the effect they may have in freeing aristocratic women.  

Lady Russell’s personality and character operated to the same end of enriching her life. Physically attractive, Rachel possessed a spirited temper, an independent spirit, and a voluble manner of speaking, reflecting her quick, sharp intelligence. At the same time she was a warm, loving, even sensuous woman, who cherished her friends and passionately adored her husband. She had personal courage, enduring nine pregnancies, witnessing the death of everyone in her immediate family except for her elder daughter, undergoing two operations for cataracts, and boldly confronting King Charles II during her husband’s imprisonment and after his execution. Such a combination of traits won her a wide circle of friends among men as well as women. A less well-endowed woman would have been unable to profit from the opportunities that class opened up to her.

Lady Russell’s long life falls into five distinct stages. The first—from her birth in 1637 through the death of her first husband, the Honorable Francis Vaughan, Lord Vaughan, in 1667—was a time scarred by personal illness and the death of many family members, when she led a life of self-indulgence, but began to develop an interest in politics and religion. The second phase lasted from her second marriage in 1669 to her husband’s execution for treason in 1683, when she was forty-six years old. This marriage, which was based on romantic love, brought her fulfillment and children and, contrary to what is often written about the impact of marriage on a woman, widened her horizons, deepening her interest in politics, religion, and estate management. The third stage marked her entry upon a protracted widowhood of forty years, almost half her lifetime. The years from 1683 to 1688 were a time of intense grieving but purposeful activity in both the private and public spheres of life. Her mastery of her sorrow also provides insight into what is called “grief management” in the twentieth century. The fourth phase, lasting from 1689 to about 1702, were years when the Glorious Revolution brought the reversal of William’s attainder for treason and a renewal of
Rachel’s social and political status and influence. Despite the onset of eye problems so serious as to require surgery, this was Lady Russell’s “prime,” the era in which she realized her full potentialities. As acknowledged head of her household, she supervised the education of her children, negotiated favorable marriage contracts for each of them, and supervised her financial and property interests, in these areas taking steps usually reserved to men. At the same time, as acknowledged Whig matriarch, a symbol of her martyred husband, and champion of his principles, she had a significant political role, exploiting the patronage system in church and state to advance the interests of family and friends and promote principles to which she adhered. During many of these years she occupied the emotional center of her family, always writing, reading, praying, grieving, and counselling others. Finally, the years from 1702 to 1723 were marked by slowly declining vigor and deepening introspection and reflection, although she continued to show interest in family, politics, religion, and property matters.

Rachel’s life demonstrates that, contrary to contemporary writers’ customary division of a woman’s life into the three stages of maidenhood, wifehood, and widowhood, characterized in each instance by dependency and submissiveness, a woman’s life may fall into successive phases of growth just as a man’s does. Although some characteristics were constant throughout her life, Rachel grew in emotional strength, religious understanding, and political sagacity. She reached a prime, just as a successful man may do, but in her case the period of greatest effectiveness came later in life—when she was a widow in her fifties and sixties, after the years of childbearing and rearing of young children were past. Widowhood was emotionally devastating to Rachel, but unquestionably it strengthened her self-confidence and sense of independence. Her long widowhood provides data to study aristocratic widows, a neglected subject.11

Throughout all the years of her adulthood and probably before, Rachel was obsessed with writing. She seemed to take an almost physical pleasure from the act of moving a pen or pencil across the page. Approximately four hundred and fifty of her letters and more than thirty of her essays survive; the probability is, as the eighteenth-century editor of her letters asserted, that she wrote “thousands” more letters during her long life. She probably also wrote more essays, which have been lost. Her voluminous correspondence was her most important instrument for expressing and insisting upon her views and for achieving and maintaining her role in both the private and public spheres.

Although her public and private roles violated conventional constraints, Lady Russell was not part of the small group of late-seventeenth-century women whom Hilda Smith has identified as the
“first feminists” because of their sensitivity to and resentment of the conventional attitude towards and restrictions on women in education, marriage, and public affairs. Rachel did not protest against patriarchal institutions or try to change them. Rather she identified with and sought recognition from them, used the conventions of her society to advance her political and religious principles and the interests of herself, her children, and her male and female friends, and ignored or circumvented some of the restraints of gender. There were, of course, many things that Rachel could not do—voting, holding political office, winning election to the House of Commons, attending a university, serving as a minister of the Anglican church. But, using her social position and personal contacts, the power of her pen, and the persuasiveness of her personality and intelligence, she was able to exercise influence in those areas. And in the private sector, as a widow, she fulfilled the role of head of household as a seventeenth-century English man would have done. Her attitudes and strategies are surely closer to the norm than those of “reason’s disciples” and thus may illuminate more faithfully the life of aristocratic women in the era.

Rachel’s life holds clues to the question of whether women react differently from men to ideas and larger events in society. The answer in her case seems to be that there is little difference for men and women of the same class. Intellectually, neither she nor her husband was a political theorist, but each subscribed to Whig political principles (including the right of resistance) and to religious ideas that were Anglican but were deeply influenced by Nonconformity. The difference between William and Rachel was over tactics. He was a reckless man, moved by chivalric ideals and a sense of responsibility to his class. She, who had always been close to the center of power through her father and other male relatives, was pragmatic and cautious, with an acute sense of the dangers inherent in political life. Had her judgment prevailed, Russell might have survived, as did other Whigs, including his best friend, William Cavendish. Rachel’s concerns transcended domestic interests—she wrote of her love for her country and her religion—but possessed of a more finely tuned political instinct than her husband, she was willing to tailor her views and her actions to protect the interests of her family.

Lady Russell was unusual rather than unique among contemporary upper-class women. She shared a concern for politics with women such as Dorothy (Sidney) Spencer, countess of Sunderland; Katherine, countess of Ranelagh; and Elizabeth, viscountess Mordaunt. Like them she used her class, connections, and intelligence to create the power of influence and to use that influence in the patronage networks of church and state. She led a life of religious piety, as did multitudes of other aristocratic women, and like them wrote confessions and religious prayers and essays. Indeed, the religiosity of such women invites
historians to see the Restoration as less cynical and a-religious than is commonly assumed. As a widow Rachel mourned the death of her husband, as did many other women such as Ann, Lady Fanshawe, although her grief is set apart by its intensity and duration. Like women such as Mrs. Elizabeth Howland or Anne, countess of Pembroke, Rachel was actively involved in the management of her property and estate. But few women undertook, as she did, to arrange marriage contracts for their children, carrying on the negotiations as an equal with the father in the opposite family. Thanks to her skill Rachel became the “founding mother” of the families of the present dukes of Devonshire and Rutland, and (with William Russell) of the present duke of Bedford. Her activities in these and other marriage negotiations reveal the role that a woman might play in this area, a role which has received little attention from historians. Like other contemporary women, such as Dorothy Osborne, the wife of Sir William Temple, Rachel formed a passionate attachment to her husband. The letters of both of these women provide tantalizing glimpses of that little explored subject of female sexuality. The evidence is explicit that Rachel found great joy and fulfillment in marital relations and that the prudery of the nineteenth century was foreign to her nature. Whatever the similarities between Rachel and other contemporary women, she stands apart not just because each individual is distinct, but also because all the above-mentioned themes—politics, piety, property, and passion—and not just one or two as in the case of other women, are present in varying degrees in all the phases of her adult life.

The center of Rachel’s life was always her family, household and a spreading network of kin and friends, both male and female. Her experiences illuminate aristocratic family life and add a female perspective to the picture of that life drawn so fully by Lawrence Stone. As just mentioned, female sexuality in marriage finds some illumination from her example. Rachel’s management of her London and Hampshire estates and of the marriage contracts of her children, and her exercise of influence over local church appointments, show a woman engaged in activities usually reserved to a man. Another striking feature of her family life was the strong ties between her and her sisters (her brothers died young). Those ties provided emotional support, underlay political connections, and facilitated the settlement of properties in which the women had an interest. Although the importance of affection between brothers and sisters has been remarked, sisterly relationships have not been much noticed. Rachel’s experience invites attention to them. Rachel had other women friends, particularly Lady Shaftesbury, but women were rather shadowy figures in her personal life. She identified with men: the most powerful influence on her early development was her father, and her closest confidants in adulthood were men: her husband, her father-in-
law, clerics, and her French uncle and cousin. Her attitude and experience provide an early English example of a recently identified characteristic of Enlightenment domesticity: heterosocial friendships among kin and nonkin, based on the assumption of women’s rationality and essential equality with men. Rachel placed high value on these relationships, regarding friendship as the highest pleasure, next to marriage, that the world had to offer.

Furthermore, Lady Russell’s relationship with her children not only reveals her personality and values but also gives rare insight into childhood in late-seventeenth-century England. She and her husband were loving and indulgent parents who took a deep interest in their children’s antics, prattle, illnesses, and growth. Her letters provide glimpses of their children’s toys, bedtime regimen, and early education, while the letters of the elder daughter, written when she was about six years old and preserved by a fond father, confirm the warm relationship. The presence of grandparents in late-seventeenth-century families was rare. The Russell children did have a paternal grandfather who wrote them, showered them with gifts, played with them, and, certainly in the case of his grandson, spoiled them. Later, Rachel, as a grandmother herself, displayed like warmth toward her grandchildren.

Another significant characteristic of Rachel’s private life was her relationship with the families to which she was connected through her marriages and those of her sisters and children. Without abandoning her identification with her family of birth and the family she and Russell created, she established and maintained a lifelong loving relationship with these other families. The result was enhancement of her personal status in both private and public life. She also actively used her influence, when it became available after 1689, to promote the interest of members of this extended family network. The openly affectionate attachment to family which is often associated with the nineteenth-century English family is found well developed in Rachel’s life.

The story of the publication of Rachel’s letters and nineteenth-century biographies explains why she has been portrayed largely as a mourning wife and devoted mother. Her letters were published not to preserve her memory but to rescue the reputation of her husband. Indeed, when Lady Russell died in 1723, there was nothing to assure that her memory would long survive at all. Members of her close family who were still alive died shortly after she did—her elder daughter and last remaining child in 1725; her grandson, the third duke of Bedford, in 1732. There is no indication that either one had planned to perpetuate her memory by publishing her letters. It was left to her devoted steward, Thomas Sellwood, to transcribe her letters and to present them, in 1748, to her great-grandson, the fourth duke of Bedford. But no further
steps were taken for twenty-five years. In 1773, a time when ideological disputes among court Whigs, opposition Whigs, and Tories were conducted with renewed sharpness, Sir John Dalrymple published the second volume of his *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland*, the first history of late-seventeenth-century England to be based upon French sources. He revealed that Russell had intrigued with emissaries from the French court (as had been charged in 1678) and that Algernon Sidney, another renowned Whig, had accepted money from Louis XIV. In commenting upon this evidence, Dalrymple expressed a sense of deep shock—as if, he said, he had “seen a son turn his back in the day of battle.” Russell’s reputation was seriously threatened. Immediately, materials appeared to rebut and explain away Dalrymple’s charges and rehabilitate William. In the absence of William’s own papers, the letters Rachel wrote between 1683 and her death in 1723 were published within three months. The unsigned title page declared that Lady Russell’s letters were about to be printed when Dalrymple’s *Memoirs* appeared. It was decided, therefore, to preface the whole with an introduction “Vindicating the Character of Lord Russell Against Sir John Dalrymple.” Accordingly, the introduction to Rachel’s letters barely mentions her. Rather, the anonymous author argued that Dalrymple’s evidence was suspect and his interpretation misguided, and insisted that William was a martyr to Stuart tyranny. Rachel’s letters, many of them encomia to her husband, reinforced the message. Her undoubted piety reflected well on her husband. Her deep distress over his death and repeated affirmations of her love of him implied that he was innocent, for no woman so good as she could have married a traitor to his country. The *Letters* enjoyed great popularity, going through seven more editions in London and two in Dublin by 1821, and laid the foundations for a view of Rachel which has prevailed ever since.

Other printed matter supported the portrait of Rachel as mourner and Russell as martyr. For example, in 1784, a playwright, William Hayley, dedicated a play titled *Lord Russell, A Tragedy*, to the duchess of Devonshire (a descendant of the Russells). He cited Rachel’s letters as his inspiration and, confessing to “affectionate admiration” of William, declared that he had attempted to paint an exact picture of him. In fact, Hayley presented villains (James, duke of York, and King Charles II), and a hero and heroine, Lord and Lady Russell. William was “Heroic Russell, bright and genuine martyr of Liberty and Truth,” who despised the doctrine of nonresistance because it “sinks the free-born sons of England / To the tame vassals of a Turkish despot.” Rachel was a “lovely virtuous woman” who prostrated herself before the duke of York and the king of England to plead for her husband’s life, and so affected the king
that he expressed his envy of Russell because of “Th’ angelic tenderness of that chaste woman.” Notwithstanding her devotion to her husband, her strength of character was such that she was able to master her emotions at their farewell.23

In 1784 a cleric and aspiring playwright, Thomas Stratford, penned a similar message. He depicted William in prison in chains (stage directions call for them to rattle), and subjected to torture. Stratford transformed Russell into a classical patriot and compared him to the ancient heroes who defended their country at Thermopylae. Rachel, torn apart by grief, threatens suicide, curses the Stuart kings as tyrants, and asks herself how she, a “free-born English woman” who enjoys “Heaven’s equal charter,” could have begged them to pardon her husband. In another scene, quite distracted, she pulls out her hair.24 Stratford’s play, of course, tells more about late-eighteenth-century political and intellectual concerns than it does about the Russells. The pertinent point is that it perpetuated the view of Rachel as nothing more than a pious, loving, and supportive wife.

It was not until 1819 that a biography of Rachel appeared. In that year the duke of Devonshire acceded to the request of unidentified “friends” and permitted the publication of many of the intimate letters Lady Russell had written to William in the 1670s, which the historian Mary Berry had sorted and annotated in 1815. Berry agreed to write a biographical sketch of Rachel to introduce the collection, which appeared under the title Some Account Of The Life Of Rachael Wriothesley Lady Russell By The Editor of Madame Du Deffand’s Letters Followed By A Series Of Letters From Lady Russell To Her Husband, William Lord Russell, From 1672 to 1682; Together With Some Miscellaneous Letters To and From Lady Russell.25 Berry was full of apologies for the subject and her work. Lady Russell’s letters, she declared, were “devoid of every ornament of style.” Their “merit must arise entirely from a previous knowledge of the character and habits of their writer.” Her biographical essay she dismissed as no more than a “biographical notice” because of the paucity of facts and the insignificance of many of them.26 But she admired Rachel as a “bright...example of female excellence” who sacrificed no feminine virtue and whose life might be a guide to other women.27 Although aware of other dimensions to Rachel’s life, Berry portrayed her largely as a devoted wife and mother. Some Account enjoyed immediate popularity and went through three editions by 1820. The biographical sketch, without the letters, was also well received and was reprinted in 1819, 1820, and 1844. Two more biographies, one heavily indebted to Berry’s sketch, were published, one in 1832 and the other in 1847 or 1857.28 In the meantime, the 1773 edition of Rachel’s
letters continued to command an audience. Between 1801 and 1820 the sixth through the eighth editions appeared, while another edition appeared in the series The British Prose Writers.

Books and essays about William and biographies of Rachel continued to pour from the press in the early nineteenth century. The effect was to keep information about Rachel as well as her husband before the public. The effort to refurbish William’s reputation was undertaken by Lord John Russell, who was just beginning his long political career as a reformer in the House of Commons and who also had literary ambitions. In 1819 he published a biography of his great-great-grandfather. Although written with restraint, the study was an apologia for William. Lord John Russell concluded his book with several admiring comments about Rachel. He characterized her during her marriage to William as a woman of “amiable” character and described her conduct during her husband’s trial and imprisonment as “sublime.” He declared that her “most striking” feature was the esteem in which she was held by contemporaries and posterity without “any ambitious effort” on her part. “She showed herself in the appropriate character of a wife and a mother.”

Pictures also helped to reinforce and spread the positive view of Lord Russell as a victim of Stuart tyranny and of Rachel as his faithful helpmate. In 1825, John, the sixth duke of Bedford, commissioned Sir George Hayter (1792–1871) to paint a picture of William's trial, as a gesture, it was said, “to the fair fame of his illustrious ancestor.” The huge canvas, said to be Hayter’s chef d'oeuvre, depicted a crowded courtroom scene with Russell calm and dignified and Rachel looking anxiously at him. Shortly thereafter, the painting was rendered in an engraving by John Bromley. It was regarded as such a treasure that Francis, the seventh duke, arranged for it to be included in the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1855. Today it hangs in Woburn Abbey.

In the 1850s, as Lord John Russell’s political career was reaching its climax, further attention was directed to Lord and Lady Russell. In 1853 Lord John Russell brought out a fourth edition of his biography of William and a new edition of all of Rachel's previously published letters as well as a few new ones. He made it clear in the preface that one reason for printing Rachel’s letters was to counter the impression of William Russell given by Lord Macaulay in his recently published History of England. Lord John Russell maintained that Macaulay had not distinguished sharply enough between the aims of Shaftesbury and William; that William was opposed to any kind of active resistance; and that he had been “murdered” by the Stuart court “in order to establish arbitrary power, and destroy the liberties of England.” Again, the apparent assumption was that such a fine woman as Rachel, her worth displayed in her letters, would not have loved a traitor. The duke of Bedford sent
a copy of this book to François Guizot, the French Protestant historian and statesman, who was so beguiled by the “rare and charming” qualities of Lady Rachel, her devotion to her patriot husband, and the depth of their domestic happiness that he decided to write an account of their life as “an example” to his own irreligious age which, he said, cannot conceive of “passion, except unbounded.” 34 Guizot’s L’Amour dans le mariage, heavily indebted to Berry’s essay, appeared in English in 1855, the very year it was printed in French, translated by John Martin (archivist to the Bedford family) at the request of the duke of Bedford, and dedicated to the duchess of Bedford. It captured an audience too, appearing in New York in 1864 under the title Love in Marriage and in London in 1883 as The Devoted Life of Rachel Lady Russell, both titles conveying accurately the tenor of the book and the view of Rachel. The book also influenced Catherine Pollock Manners, Lady Stepney, whose book, Memoirs of Lady Russell and Lady Herbert, published in 1898, was the last biography of Rachel to be written.

These nineteenth-century biographies were not wrong in presenting Rachel Russell as a pious woman devoted to husband and family. Rather, the portrait they drew is incomplete. The picture that they painted captured the imagination and sensibilities of nineteenth-century readers and assured that for a long time the reading public would know of and admire Lady Russell as a paragon of feminine virtue. 35 One purpose of this book is to enlarge that portrait to encompass the complexities in her personality, attitudes, and actions, and to show how a woman exploited the opportunities available to her to escape conventional restraints without condemning them. Rachel had many things in common with other women of her class, and her life may well provide fresh insight into the nature of female aristocratic culture.

I have been under no illusions about the challenges of writing a biography. Although some people regard it as a genre separate from “serious” history, I have not found prescriptions in handbooks about biography so very different from those which command the research and writing of intellectual and political history. Although psychoanalysis is sometimes recommended as preparation for the aspiring biographer, I have not submitted to it nor tried to become an instant expert in psychoanalytical theory. I do not disdain psychobiography, 36 but I have not attempted to practice it. Yet, I have found the approach of social learning theorists helpful, 37 and I have used some commonsense insights, which in the late twentieth century are part of the common wisdom, to help understand the nature of Lady Rachel’s personality.

The record of Lady Russell’s attitudes, actions, and experiences gives historians an opportunity to examine more fully the nature of aristocratic female culture in late-seventeenth-century England. From
that record Rachel herself emerges as a richer personality than earlier biographies painted, and the culture of upper-class women, whose class conferred advantages on them, is revealed in both the private and public spheres as more complex than is usually understood.