

3-1-1986

Have women existed?: searching out history's casualties

Reta Halteman Finger

Messiah University, laretafinger@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Permanent URL: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed/38

Recommended Citation

Halteman Finger, Reta, "Have women existed?: searching out history's casualties" (1986). *Biblical, Religious, & Philosophical Studies Educator Scholarship*. 38.

https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed/38

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society. This content is freely provided to promote scholarship for personal study and not-for-profit educational use.

Have Women Existed?

Searching Out History's Casualties

by Reta Halteman Finger

I hate to be the bearer of bad news. It's too risky. They used to kill people for that, was it the Assyrians or the Greeks who would slaughter heralds sent from the field of battle with news of defeat? Still, I'll take a stab at it. The worst that can happen is letters to the editor accusing me of anger and bitterness.

For in spite of this upbeat issue on worthy women in church history, in spite of the enormous pride and gratitude I feel toward those Spirit-filled saints who fought the patriarchal dragon with the sword of justice, I'm still angry. I still grieve for the women whose stories may never come to light, for the good that, as Shakespeare put it, "lies interred with their bones."

Our standard church histories, for instance, are dominated by males. How true this is I found out last spring while taking a course in historical theology from the early church to the Reformation. Though the topic fascinated me, and I devoured our three required texts, I do not remember a single woman mentioned in any of them. Fifteen hundred years of theological, administrative, and political struggle—and no woman had any input important enough to mention or give her credit for? Coupled with the use of exclusive language in these texts, one could conclude that no woman had even

existed in the church for fifteen hundred years. That's when you *know* you're not getting the whole picture....

But it's when I do get more of the picture that sadness and rage really overwhelm me. The search for women's history also turns up the casualties—those women broken on the rack of patriarchy who never had a chance to be all they could be.

My mind runs to two such women who have touched my life. The first was a brilliant might-have-been, whose spirit managed to survive in the end, but whose manifold potential was forever lost to a needy world. The other was only an ordinary might-have-been, a woman abused and neglected and who abused and neglected in turn, and died unloved and in great pain.

* * *

Have you heard of Mehetabel Wesley, sister of John and Charles? I've carried her around in my head for years, ever since I read a book about her better-known mother Susanna. Hetty Wesley is an example of the sisters of great men who may have possessed equal or greater ability, but femaleness prevented them from fulfillment.

In terms of beauty, wit, intelligence, and a pleasing personality, Hetty Wesley

stands out among the seven Wesley sisters, all of whom were conspicuous for these qualities. Her father Samuel recognized her unusual mental gifts, and spent many hours teaching her. By the age of eight she could read the Greek New Testament.

Growing up in eighteenth-century England, Hetty attracted numerous suitors, but marriage never worked out, partly because her father quickly disposed of those who did not please him. By the age of 27 Hetty was serving as a governess away from home, when she fell madly in love with a young lawyer. He asked Hetty's father for her hand in marriage. Samuel Wesley investigated the young man, dubbed him "unprincipled," and forbade Hetty ever to see him again.

As a woman of age and earning her own living, Hetty decided to take matters into her own hands. One night they eloped with the understanding they would marry the following day. After one night together, the lawyer (historians are not sure of his name) refused to go through with the ceremony, and Hetty was forced to return home in total humiliation.

From that time on, shame and remorse marked Hetty's life. Her "upright and moral" father never forgave her for staining the Wesley name with an illicit relationship, and at first the only person who would stand up to him for Hetty was her crippled sister Mary. No one else believed her repentance was genuine.

Completely rejected at home, Hetty rashly vowed to marry the first man who asked her. Though nothing was publicly stated regarding this delicate matter, birth and death records show that Hetty had become pregnant as a result of that one fateful night with her lover. This further explains her desperate need to be married in that Puritanical society. Along came a wayfaring illiterate plumber who asked to marry Hetty. Soon realizing how totally unsuited he was for her, Hetty tried to back out of the marriage, but her father compelled her to go through with it.

Hetty resolved to give her husband all the love and support she could, but her sorrow increased as he became an alcoholic, her first four babies died soon after birth, and her father maintained his bitter, unforgiving spirit. Though through the years John and Charles both tried to mollify their father, he never relented and Hetty was cut off from family gatherings until he died. For years, Hetty's religious activities were restricted by her husband, whom she dutifully obeyed as expected of a wife of her day. Later he softened a little, and she became a Methodist.

Hetty was an invalid for the last years of her life and died in 1750 in extreme pain at the age of 55. The poetry and songs which Hetty wrote and which have survived show that, in spite of terrible oppression by her father and husband, Hetty's spirit did triumph. She was able to find the comfort in Christ that she missed from others. It is believed that one of the finest poems attributed to her brother Charles was written by her.

What might Hetty have become had she been born male? Would she even have outdistanced her brother John? The patriarchal veil drops over such might-have-beens and covers up answers to feminist questions. We cannot change our past.

* * *

The other woman is my father's Aunt Lizzie, a far cry from the refinement and grace of a Mehetabel Wesley. In a way I can hardly bear to include them in the same article. You never met a more complaint-ridden eccentric in your life. One visited Aunt Lizzie only under great obligation, suffering through generous offers of goat's milk laced with a nonstop whine about all the troubles that had befallen her. I've never known anyone else who could get five colds in a week, each accompanied by a new backache.

Aunt Lizzie hated men of all kinds and only barely tolerated children. She never married, and as a young adult was called on to help raise her brother's motherless children, one of whom was

my father. "She kicked him around," was the phrase passed on to us, preferring his two sisters and baby brother.

Only through feminist eyes much later did I realize the source of Aunt Lizzie's craziness. She had been the seventh child in a farm family of nine, all boys except for an older sister with a heart problem. In this strict Pennsylvania German family, boys learned to do barn and field work, and girls the housework. Girls could also help with farm work, but boys *never* so much as dried a dish in the house. I can only imagine the endless tasks taken for granted, and the derision and putdowns from her older brothers.

Aunt Lizzie rebelled against the male-female role inequity played out in the name of tradition and religion by becoming inefficient, bitter, and hostile. Turning her anger against the men and children in her life, the abused became the abuser. Aunt Lizzie died at age 60 of spine cancer in an old folks' home,

unloved to the end. Her backaches had been real, though no one believed them for years.

I do believe Aunt Lizzie was responsible in part for her own problems, however, as Hetty Wesley was for hers. We are not mere pawns shifted about on the chessboard of life. Some choices are our own, and some women drown in oppression and hardships, while others grow strong.

Nevertheless, stories like these throw into sharpest relief the patriarchal beast that maims and crushes underdogs in its path. For these women—and for ourselves when despair and defeat overtake us—is it not appropriate to shed tears of anger and grief?

RETA FINGER is editor of *Daughters of Sarah* and is working on a Masters degree in New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Illinois.

Keep on Digging, Feminists

I think the idea that history is written by the winners is a lie. There are only very, very few situations where that is literally true. Usually plenty of things are left by the "losers," and the job of the antithesis historians is to keep digging it up, evaluating, circulating, and challenging.

Those who say history is dry and dull have never known history. Within the science of history lies the conflict of ideas—because how we understand the past determines a lot about how we live now and plan for the future. Some try to use the past to justify the status quo or the continuance of injustice. The antithesis people try to make the past speak for a view of change, reform, renewal.

My sense is that feminist history in this country is still in the early stages of development. We could learn a few things from Afro-American historians, black and white. We need journals, on-going research, new textbooks for schools, conferences, the whole spread which has grown well for Afro-American work in the last twenty-five years. (Not that these folks are home free yet; they're just a few steps ahead of the feminists.) As black and white historians are learning to work together, women and men need to do so in the area of feminist historiography.

—John Burt