Im Gespräch

"The development of the gendered eye"

Lotte van de Pol interviews Olwen Hufton[1]

Olwen Hufton was born in the North of England, in 1938. She studied history at Royal Holloway College, London, and got her PhD at the University of London (1962). For twenty years she taught at the University of Reading, from 1974 as a professor. In 1987 she went to Harvard, to the History Department and became as well the Chair of the new Women's Studies program. From 1991–1997 she was Professor of Comparative Early Modern European History at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Since 1997 she has been at Merton College, Oxford, where she had a Leverhulme Personal Research Professorship from 1997–2002. Olwen Hufton has had many visiting professorships, and two honorary degrees. Her books, "The Poor of Eighteenth-century France" and "The Prospect before her" have received prestigious awards.

Olwen Hufton has published five books: "Bayeux in the late Eighteenth-century" (1967); "The Poor of Eighteenth-century France" (1975); "Europe: Privilege and Protest 1730–1789" (1981, new edition 2000); "Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution" (1991) and "The Prospect before her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500–1800" (1995). One book is in press: "Poverty and the Purse" (forthcoming 2003). She published many articles and edited three volumes: "Historical Change and Human Rights" (1995); "Women in the religious Life" (1995) and "Gender and the Use of Time" (1998) (with Yota Kravaritou). Several of her books have been translated in other languages. Three titles were translated into German: "Menschenrechte in der Geschichte" (1998), "Aufstand und Reaktion. Europa von 1730–1789" (1983) and "Frauenleben. Eine europäische Geschichte 1500–1800" (1998).

1 Interview held August 12, 2002 in Utrecht, The Netherlands. Dr Lotte van de Pol is at the Research Institute for History and Culture of the University of Utrecht. She has written extensively on (Dutch) women in the early modern period, for example, "The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe", MacMillan1989, 1996 with Rudolf Dekker (in German: "Frauen in Männerkleidern. Weibliche Transvestiten und ihre Geschichte", Wagenbach 1990) and "Het Amsterdams Hoerdom. Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw", Amsterdam 1996. Currently she is writing a book on poor women in early modern Amsterdam; she is also working on a biography of Princess Wilhelmina of Prussia (1751–1820).

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Olwen Hufton is widely considered to be one of the great living historians. She first made her name with "The Poor of Eighteenth-century France" (1975), which in an imaginative way and in very vivid prose depicts the lives of the poor, and their stratagems for survival in what she termed the "economy of makeshifts" or, "the economy of expediency", terms which have been widely adopted. "The Poor" is a classic of 20th century historical writing, and still the best book on the subject. It is also as much if not more about women than men since poverty is always predominantly a female phenomenon. Her next book was a general history of Europe in the 18th century, but otherwise Hufton, in studying poverty, crime, the French Revolution and religious life, has always concentrated on women's lives, women's experiences and women's strategies in life. All these qualities come together in "The Prospect before her" (1995), the first volume of a history of women in the Western world. The book is built upon the question what fate and what choices in life await a female child born in early modern Europe. Olwen Hufton displays in her work a keen eye for meaningful details, a great compassion for the people she studies and a sharp insight into the material and cultural conditions of the choices in their daily lives. Her work is very evocative and well-written.

I talked with her about her development as a women's historian, about her history of women in Western Europe, her stand in the typically British historical tradition of empiricism, and, last, her latest research project on Jesuits and the financing of the Counter Reformation, a subject that, with an inevitably gendered eye, turned out to be more on women than anyone would have foreseen.

Lotte van de Pol: You started out as a general historian, at a time when women's history did not exist. Could you tell me how your life as a women's historian evolved?

Olwen Hufton: As a student in the early sixties, I did my doctoral on French history under the distinguished historian of France, Alfred Cobban and so became involved in the most dynamic historiographical approach of the period, that of the *Annales* school with its emphasis on „histoire sérielle", demography and material culture, and such themes as the distribution of wealth and the constraints on food production in traditional societies. Being British, I was also exposed to the History from Below approach, about which I was very passionate, and Marxism. I was not a Marxist historian, but I thought the questions being asked about economic causation were absolutely fundamental to historical understanding. My initial work was on the town of Bayeux during the Revolution and the informing questions were what kind of people lived there, what was the basis of their livelihoods and how did the Revolution impact upon their lives? Although my eye was insufficiently gendered then to think of women as a category, I came across their predominance on poor lists and their opposition to state led religious change and bread shortage. In "The Poor", my second book, I went further to explore how those too poor to pay taxes – and so escaped the net of the *Annales* school – constructed some kind of livelihood through charity, emigration, illegal activities such as smuggling and prostitution; I also looked into criminal records and phenomena such as child abandonment. I sought to reconstruct family economies and there I first began to use the phrase the economy of expedients: the way in which people put together small resources in different phases of their life-cycle

in order to survive. In looking at the poor, it was impossible not to encounter women on a major scale.

I was therefore very well equipped to talk and think further about women when the changes of the late sixties and seventies occurred, and the idea that women had somehow been denied a past became insistent. My first lecture specifically on women was given in 1968 in a student seminar in Oxford as part of a series of lectures on revolutions, which were the great preoccupation of the day. I was quite a young lecturer and immensely pleased to be on a list that included Edward Thompson and George Rud. In putting this lecture together, I went back to my notes, and started thinking about where women might intrude on the big picture of the Revolution. I looked at women and bread riots, riots that might turn political perhaps, and subsequently, on women's approaches to religious change which destroyed part of the sociability of religious structures and rituals as well as traditional welfare provisions. The lecture was published by "Past and Present" and was quite significant in my developing career because it got letters from scholars like Natalie Davis who were putting together the first significant bibliographies on women's history. Women scholars networked a great deal at the beginning. In 1974 I went for the first time to the US sponsored by a French History conference and did a tour organized by Louise Tilly, Joan Scott and Natalie Davis.

We were much slower in England than in the US to introduce women in the curriculum. However, students were interested. "History Workshop" was very supportive and in the late seventies and the early eighties I started teaching courses in women's history at the University of Reading (where I was a professor), which were well attended. In 1986 I went to Harvard, to a position which included the brief to teach at least one course in women's history. Before I got there, however, the Women's Studies program came into being as a recognized concentration and I found myself the chair. Together with another British historian, Alex Owen, I taught the history of feminism from Mary Wollstonecraft to Mary Daly. It was quite a small program, we were able to accept twenty students, all based in different disciplines. The budget allowed us to import guest scholars to deal with issues such as Black Feminism and slave narratives. It was very exciting and very different for me. I realized I liked change. I was also a senior fellow of the Center for European Studies which remains my idea of paradise. I began to become more interdisciplinary and much more comparative. Harvard was a real shot in the arm.

In 1990 I published "Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution" as my particular contribution to the bi-centenary of the French Revolution. In 1991 I left Harvard for family reasons and went to the European University in Florence. This institute was also productive of many new experiences. First, I became more visual, perhaps just because being in Italy makes one more conscious of art and artefacts. Second I was ranging much more widely. My first clutch of students, for example, included three who were working on early modern nuns and we held a nuns' group seminar which I think was very innovative. Another big bonus in Florence itself, outside the Institute, was a group of very good women historians, organized and held together by Sara Matthews Grieco whom I admire enormously. It constituted a rich environment which gave a great deal of excitement to my time there. I found that the Mediterranean approach to the history of women was very different from the Northern European one. Women in Mediterranean

society were held back from the labour force until well into the 19th and 20th centuries. I learned how women existed in such systems in the early modern period, and how they gained self consciousness and a promotion of self through, for example, the self examination of the confessional. The structures of family life produced forms of problems and issues for women that did not arise in North Western Europe. For example, in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, families of the upper classes married some of their daughters whom they backed by large dowries in their early teens, to husbands who could be 10–15 years older than themselves. It was a system tailor-made to produce large numbers of widows as well as quantities of unhappy wives and recruits for the cloister.

Lotte van de Pol: Would you agree that the situation of women in North Western Europe and Mediterranean Europe have been different from the time of the Roman Empire?

Olwen Hufton: Certainly from the early modern period you can see substantial differences. In North Western Europe women are much more actively engaged with the economy: young women going to towns to find work. In Mediterranean countries there is a great deal of dishonour involved when a woman leaves her own home. Whereas maidservants are to be found in Holland or Britain at least from the 15th century and the sector has virtually feminised from the 17th century, it is not until the 19th century that service becomes more female in Mediterranean countries. In the North the custom of leaving home and engaging in economic pursuits and personal saving to add to the little bit that perhaps comes from one's parents, was becoming the norm for women. It was perhaps hard but it was also to a degree empowering. You have also much more in the way of communities of women outside the home that are not particularly religious based, like the neighborhoods. If one thinks of works like Margaret Spuffords "Contrasting Communities" (1984) where village women meet in groups to learn to read the Bible and sects developed where women discussed the meaning of Scripture, one has a much more interactive experience than that for Mediterranean women. Also, countries of Roman Law were particularly hard on women.

Lotte van de Pol: It was in Italy that you finished the first volume of the "History of Women in Europe".

Olwen Hufton: Yes, and it was also at the European Institute that I gathered material for Volume two, on the nineteenth and twentieth century. One experience which was very time consuming but in the long run very thought provoking was the set of conferences and workshops I ran with the Greek lawyer Yota Kravaritou on "Gender and the Use of Time". It was concerned not only with how men and women spend time on family and work but ways in which time could be divided more fairly in respect of work, leisure and family. In 1993–1994, when the conferences were held, we were somewhat more optimistic that the frantic life patterns of people in the labour market could be made to work more favourably and equitably between the sexes. We finished by receiving delegates and expressing our findings to representatives from the European Parliament and we had much contact with the European Commission. I could not have done that anywhere else.

Another year I ran seminars on women and saving in traditional societies: how women managed to save and what they saved for. In particular in a nineteenth century context I wanted to understand how women's savings contributed to changes, such as educational opportunities or the means to emigrate. Again, I had some wonderful students there. I recently developed some of the work I did for this seminar programme for a commemorative lecture for Raphael Samuel by "History Workshop". I chose nineteenth century Ireland and investigated means of buying the passage to America and women's input through family saving. I looked at pig keeping – saving up little sums by fattening a pig was very common: the money box pig is not an arbitrary choice – and at lace making. Ireland is marked by the development of convent based small scale lace industries in specific areas where local girls can go and be taught a skill. It takes a long time to learn but after a few years the girls can be reasonable earners. Then they will perhaps buy a cow to get married. After marriage a woman might continue to work and save up a bit. All these little sums put together might buy one passage to America for the man, to go and try to set them up. And she might go on earning a little, and they might get a child over, and finally she may go to the poor law authorities and they will pay for the passage of herself and the remaining children to get them off the books. It is the kind of strategy which interests me for its transformational character. A lot of this kind of work will find its way into my second volume on women.

In 1997 I went to Merton College, Oxford. I was lucky to have a senior research professorship from the Leverhume Trust for five years. I chose a big project called "Funding the Counter Reformation". It is a project about money, and again it starts with a question: Who paid for the Counter Reformation? I became especially interested in who financed welfare and educational projects. I was inspired by work which was not produced by social and economic historians but by amongst others, architectural historians, who have worked on spending on big buildings. For some time I have been interested in the motives of donors and dissatisfied with a mono-causal explanation as to the exchange involved in "the gift" or to the philanthrophy as explained by fear of Purgatory or by a concern to preserve oneself from social unrest. I agree that a donor seeks something in return for his or her money but I would wish to be open to more complex factors. I think one needs to look more closely at types of donors and the elections they make in placing their wealth. As in, for example, Jones and Underwood's book on Margaret Beaufort, the wife of Henry VII.[2] She – and some of her friends – founded a number of Cambridge colleges of which they considered themselves the mothers. All had survived the Wars of the Roses and saw education as a means of producing a disciplined society.

Lotte van de Pol: You chose a subject which was totally new and had nothing to do with women, but inevitably you brought your gendered eye. Did that lead you to a gendered view of the Jesuits?

2 Michael Jones u. Malcolm Underwood, The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, Cambridge 1992.

Olwen Hufton: Inevitably. The Jesuits undertook the first big private schooling system in Europe, which expanded to 500 schools, some of which had several hundred pupils. These schools have left their mark on the landscape of many European cities. To build their colleges they had hoped to have as their major donors great men, clerics and so on. But what they discovered was that in fact in the early days this was not forthcoming and they were getting lots of support from women, from widows in particular, who were in command of substantial resources and were prepared to invest in this kind of new schooling. The Jesuits I think were the first modern fund raisers, and among the elements of their mission statement was that they were offering a disciplined, rich and meaningful education (to boys alone at this stage, though they later were active promoters of some of the women's teaching orders). They were offering the promise of a new man, as it were, one who was not an italic, who was not involved in war, who was gentler, more refined, principled and verbally eloquent. In looking at individual women who built colleges or churches for the Jesuits I came across a whole panoply of reasons for involvement. Some of the female donors were still happily married and they gained perhaps most from involvement in a worthy enterprise. Others were very unhappily married and may have wished to leave money away from their families which had placed them in distasteful circumstances when very young. From their own experiences they might be attracted by the idea of a new man. The Jesuits also strongly emphasized confessional practice: they were the first marriage counselors. They cultivated an impassive neutral approach which must have been very comforting for women locked in unhappy circumstances. Most sizeable women donors were childless or their children had died. A lot of them were very rich since they had carried into matrimony resources from their families of origin. On widowhood they could re-appropriate these funds, and they were certainly open to suggestions as where to place it in ways which might give meaning to their lives and those of others.

Lotte van de Pol: When you started on the Jesuit project, did you expect women and gender issues to pop up like that?

Olwen Hufton: I don't know whether it came as such a surprise. Ignatius Loyola's letters to women have been published. I had encountered women in the foundation of uncloistered women's religious orders in France. I knew the legislation introduced by Louis XIV under the pressure of families to stop women leaving so often away from their homes. So I wasn't totally unaware, but let us say I now know more about it and I think the promt for this came from not supposing that men and women have the same motives, that there might be a gendered aspect.

It seems to me that the great breakthrough of a historical concern with women has been just this and that of course the terms male and female can be further broken down into all sorts of sub-categories.

Lotte van de Pol: Winding up your career: you are a year before official retirement, and there are many more books to come?

Olwen Hufton: Yes, though of course you mean my university career. Academics don't really retire, do they? The next thing in line for publication is a set of lectures, the Wiles lectures, which I gave in Belfast as long ago as 1999. The book is called "Poverty and the purse", on the funding of charity, and should be out next year. It is not a very long book. Three books are in progress. "Faith, Hope and Money. Funding the Catholic Reformation" is the provisional title of the book which includes the Jesuit material. That is going to be a big book; but I am also cooking a short study with the provisional title "Father Trigault's Journey. Fundraising for the China mission", on an adventurous journey over land, from Asia to Europe, in 1617, by a Jesuit to raise money to sustain Jesuit work in China and to bring back curious gifts to capture the imagination of the scientifically advanced mandarin classes. And there will be "The Reckoning. The History of Women in Western Europe Volume II, 1800–2000", which is on the stocks.

Lotte van de Pol: Most of your work, with the possible exceptions of "Bayeux" and "Privilege and Protest", is either on women or highly gendered; but these two volumes on the history of women in the Western world will, inevitably, be your claim to fame in women's history. It has been a very long time project in your life. How and when did you embark on such a project?

Olwen Hufton: I think I was first asked for a book on European women by a publisher in 1976 – certainly by 1978. It was a rather intense period of my life. My second child was born 1976; by the early 1980s I had two growing children, an infirm mother, and departmental responsibilities so I did not want dead lines staring me in the face. But I knew I would write this book. Many books grow out of courses and lectures, and I gave many talks on women in the eighties, for example during three months as a visiting professor at the University of Melbourne. Little by little I was building up drafts of sections of a book. In 1986 I went to All Souls, Oxford for a year and gained a great deal from Richard Smith on demographic issues. Then I went to Harvard, taking a rough text of the book with me. I was very busy at Harvard, but in 1991 my editor from "Privilege and Protest", Stuart Profitt, took me for a very good lunch and asked me where my next book was. I confessed to a script in the drawer and I promised to get it out.

It was in Italy that I came to grips with the book seriously and reflectively. I think the book bears the imprint of my stay in Italy, but really many experiences fed into the writing of "The Prospect". "The Prospect" is very much concerned with continuities, and in the last chapter I conceive of a procession of women at the beginning of the early modern period and then another somewhere around 1800. You can see that there are more women who are literate, there are more women writers, more women in the labour force, etcetera, but there are limits to the possibilities of change. Volume two has to be a book thinking about change and changes and about the pace and geographical differences in change. Obviously very rapid changes occurred over the 20th century in the acquisition of political rights and educational opportunities, and with that the possibilities of doing better, and to have control over one's body, and to be able to appropriate certain life patterns. However, changes are not evenly distributed over social groups or nationally and regionally. I do not want to lose sight of individual lives and life cycle experience changes as between generations.

In my own life I have witnessed a lot of changes, some for the better, some for the worse. I hope I will be able to think in the last chapter about something of my own observations of the generation of my children, because I think that the conditions in which they are operating are at one level much easier than the conditions that my generation operated in, in that people are more open to the idea that women have careers. But the actual hours of work now attached to certain jobs are horrendous. There exists a labour marker in which the time patterns are essentially male time patterns rather than female time patterns. Balancing work and family is hardly easier than it was when I had my children. Child care is still inadequately provided and discussed.

Lotte van de Pol: Let's go back to the "Prospect". The second sentence of the book, in the Acknowledgements, is: "There might have been a little more about sexuality, more about power, more gender theory, more big names, if someone else had been the writer. So be it." What did you set up to defend yourself against in the first place?

Olwen Hufton: Am I defending myself? My aim was to convey what sort of a book I was offering. It is a book about human experience. I did want to get people to come away from the book with an idea of what it is like to be born a female child and to grow up within a particular framework of conditions. I wanted the evidence to speak, without my squeezing the material I had into any particular theoretical corset. Most theorizing has been about social constraints, but if you allow the constraints to compose the master narrative, you come up with a vision of women and their place in society, which is perforce very passive. I certainly assess the cultural constraints in the book, but I concentrated on the negotiations within that framework. I did not want to have one abstract woman to speak for all women, or to deal constantly with a concept of oppression. I wanted to be alert to the positive as well al the negative.

I am an empiricist. I was trained that way: I'll always be that way. I like documents to speak for themselves in many respects, although I am perfectly prepared to criticise the implicit assumptions within them – you know from your own work that a prostitute in court is not going to tell the whole story but that the story she tells is historically interesting because it is the one her audience might wish to hear. No father confessor in a *vie difiante* intended to convey his penitent's spiritual progress, is going to spend much time on the small print of ordinary everyday life, of her imperfections and mistakes as opposed to her piety.

Lotte van de Pol: You have been called a positivist, criticized probably as a positivist, have you?

Olwen Hufton: Yes, although not too severely. I have been told that some of my ex-colleagues in women's studies in Harvard described me as "the acceptable face of positivism". I'm quite happy to live with that; I am not going to apologize for how I write or think. There are many ways of writing history. And, in my view, diversity should rule. There is no one right way.

Lotte van de Pol: It is not only the evidence that speaks. Even with subjects where women and gender aspects stand out in our eyes, it is possible for good and well-trained historians not to see them. You said that when working on the poor it was impossible to overlook the women. But it has been possible. Don't you think that a paradigm change must occur and a "gendered eye" must be developed first?

Olwen Hufton: That is true. I think that the "history from below" approach helped to develop my "gendered eye". But it still is true that even very good historians in the past simply overlooked things that to us are so obvious. I remember having a testy interchange with E.P. Thompson who, when we began sometime in the sixties, clearly felt that in a sense the history of women seemed to detract from the history of the working classes. But he was still a great historian, and the few references to women in his work certainly give food for thought. I return again and again to the article he wrote on time, a piece on the introduction of the clock into the working man's life and on regulation and regimentation which employers found suited factory production.[3] His article is about resistance. Yet women appear as the enemy of the free wheeling artisan operating according to his own imperatives. He mentions them only twice. Once to show them prepared to connive with employers to get their husbands into work by the stipulated time, because that means bigger wages for the family. The second reference suggests that women may remain pre-industrial because they have to get up at night with the babies and respond to the needs of others so that their lives don't correspond to any chiming of the clock. I find it a great piece of historical writing.

Lotte van de Pol: What kind of theorizing do we need as historians?

Olwen Hufton: I think theory offers some very interesting questions which any historian at the outset of approaching a new topic should have in mind. Marx gave economic causation. Foucault asked us to think about the world of constraints. Freud asked us to think about the subconscious as a motor for behaviour. I would however separate the questions from the answers. The answers in my view should depend on the evidence not the theory. I have given you an example of what I mean form my current work. I don't think fear of Purgatory (an instrument of social control) is the total answer as to why donors make charitable bequests or build charitable institutions. But there can be many reasons why one gives. I'm very much pro the question why but I want the freedom to explore complexity.

Lotte van de Pol: What I love in your work and has been taken up universally, is the wonderful term of "economy of makeshifts" or "economy of expediency"; this concept in itself has become an important question.

Olwen Hufton: The term has made it even into economic textbooks. I actually found the phrase *vivre aux expedients* in the reports of a parish priest in the late 18th century. It has

3 E.P. Thompson, Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism, in: Past and Present, 38 (1967), 56–97.

application to the ways in which a large proportion of the world still lives and it certainly applied to the working classes of early modern Europe. I always enjoy finding instances of the obvious but sometimes ingenious ways in which this was done. I also like discerning patterns of circulation of money and goods. One of the fabulous things about your work on prostitution in Amsterdam, Lotte, are the relationships you discover between the wages of the sailors and the incomes of the whores and the retail traders.

Lotte van de Pol: Your work is an interaction between questions, sources and answers.

Olwen Hufton: Yes. I always begin with questions even when just writing a lecture. Otherwise I feel on any issue I intend to write about that I have just switched on the engine but not put the car into gear. Sources are obviously essential. I think if historians get away from the sources they are lost. You don't necessarily have to go into an archive now: there are so many printed collections and archives on the web and even before there were printed diaries and such. One of the great joys of writing on the Jesuits, is that they have produced so many printed records. On the other hand the feel and smell of the page of the real report is hard to beat.

Lotte van de Pol: A last word on women's history?

Olwen Hufton: Women's history has been important in sharpening the senses of the entire discipline. After women's history came black history, gay history, the history of masculinity, and so on. Everybody has now a right to their own history, it is regarded as a fundamental part of the identity construction. It also increased the consciousness of the need to question the assumptions underlying many texts. I think women's history is simply one of the big contributions to historical developments in the 20th century and that it has changed much of what we now read.