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## Prologue: Before the second wave: scholarship on women from the early twentieth century into the 1960s

Clearly the history of women has come a long way since Virginia Woolf first underscored our astonishing ignorance on the subject, for as we have seen, the revival of feminist militancy in the late 1960s inspired a vast outpouring of research on women in both Europe and the USA. Yet well before the upheavals of the 1960s, individual scholars like Ivy Pinchbeck in England, Mary Beard in the USA, and Léon Abensour in France were already beginning to carve out a niche for women's history through the publication of pioneering works whose structure and preoccupations laid out the initial lines along which the field would develop.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the possibilities that the new practice of social (or 'people's') history opened up for recovering the experiences of ordinary folk in the past, Pinchbeck, Beard and Abensour – along with Alice Clark, Olive Schreiner and Eileen Power, among others – all set out to write books that would restore women of the common people to the historical record.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, they sought to deepen our understanding of the social, political, economic and legal/judicial structures that have shaped women's unequal place in social, economic and political life. But they also sought to demonstrate that women, too, have been agents in history. For despite the resounding silence of history books on the matter, these scholars knew that the world that we have inherited was made not only by men but by women as well.

The period from about 1890 to the mid-1970s constituted a kind of golden age for social and economic history.<sup>3</sup> During these years, scholars across a broad range of fields – historians of industrial labour, to be sure, but also historians of the agrarian world, or of the urban popular classes – strove with militant purpose to bring the voices of common people, women included, into the history books. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars would define more precisely the specific forms of silence that have haunted women's history, even as they elucidated

the gendered structures of society and politics that underpin those forms of silence, and give them such a different meaning from the silences that have dogged people's history in general.<sup>4</sup> But in the first half of the twentieth century, feminist scholars made no such distinction between the invisibility of women in history and that of a broad range of other non-elite people (workers, peasants), all of whom had been unjustly consigned to the margins by historians' exclusive concern with the activities of national elites. The history of the family, and demographic analysis more generally, the history of agricultural and industrial production, and of workers of both sexes, the history of women: all these histories, hitherto dismissed as too small, too quotidian to merit scholarly attention, were now to be rescued from obscurity by the techniques of social and economic history. These were histories that shared a common status by virtue of being defined in opposition to the standard narratives of political, diplomatic and intellectual history, which, taken together, constituted that History-with-a-capital-H that was the glory of each nation. And it was these 'little' histories whose telling, it was hoped, would promote a more democratic and egalitarian understanding of society, with women's vital, yet ever under-sung role at last receiving the attention it deserved.

One important site of production for feminist-inspired social and economic history in the early twentieth century was the London School of Economics (LSE), which first opened its doors in 1895. Here, men and women studied together in a singular experiment in university-level co-education: 'Women were brought into the LSE by its first lecturers, and were given scholarships and academic posts,' writes feminist economic historian Maxine Berg. Moreover, 'intellectual issues were just as important as the institutional framework in attracting women and giving them the opportunity for scholarly achievement. Feminist ideas certainly provided one impetus.' But the perception among activist, reform-minded women of the 'practical and moral role of economic history' also played a vital role in drawing women to study the subject at the LSE.<sup>5</sup> For as Berg reminds us, this was an era in which questions of social policy stood at the heart of British intellectual life. Indeed, concern for contemporary social problems helped to create the disciplines of social and economic history in the first place, by turning the eyes of early twentieth-century scholar-activists to the historical investigation of economy and society. In this fashion, an entire generation of feminist scholars at the LSE took up the complex question of the impact of industrialization on women's work. Inspired by contemporary problems of wages, welfare, consumption and women's employment, Bessie Hutchins, Lilian Knowles, Dorothy George, Alice Clark, Mabel Buer and Ivy Pinchbeck all examined various aspects of the 'women and modern industry' question, in a series of books, articles and social policy tracts published over the period 1910–35.<sup>6</sup>

The range and quality of the work produced by these women seems all the more impressive when one recalls that most of them were working outside or at the very margins of the academy. As American historian of France, Bonnie Smith, has argued, the professionalization of history as a discipline across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was at the same time a process of masculinization. Hence, as history became a recognized discipline with a secure place inside European and American universities, those women who had long been writing history were excluded from or remained on the margins of an increasingly male profession, whose central concerns revolved around the (male) political sphere.<sup>7</sup> The marginal status of this early twentieth-century generation of women scholars would certainly seem to confirm Smith's argument. Indeed, in the case of Great Britain, it would take another 60 years (at least) before feminist scholarship would at last find its way into the centres of academic distinction.

Let us take a closer look at one of the major works produced by this group of scholars, Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850*. First published in 1930 (and reprinted three times since), Pinchbeck's study illustrates beautifully the encounter between social history and women's history that was to occupy such an important place in the constitution of women's history as a sub-discipline.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, her work, along with that of Alice Clark, set in place many of the questions and explanatory frameworks that would guide women's historians in the subsequent revival of feminist scholarship that accompanied feminism's second wave in the 1960s and 1970s: the centrality of work and of women's economic condition more generally in determining their overall social and political status; the importance of the Industrial Revolution in recasting that status over the nineteenth century and into the twentieth; the changing shape of the family and its central role in allocating resources; the issue of patriarchal control of resources and wages; the importance of analysing women's work and wages in relation to those of men, since the two were understood to constitute complementary forms of labour power; the divergent fates of middle- and working-class women across the great divide of the Industrial Revolution – a fact which suggests that the meanings of womanhood were not stable across class lines.<sup>9</sup> All this is woven into a tightly argued and compelling narrative, the story of how the overwhelmingly agrarian economy of mid-eighteenth-century England became the modern industrial one that we recognize today, told from the point of view of the hundreds of thousands of women who, in their incarnation as factory workers, agricultural labourers, shopkeepers and handcraft workers, were central to that transformation. Prefiguring as it does so many of the themes and arguments that would animate women's history after the late 1960s, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* merits our sustained attention.

## 'But women have always worked': women, work and the Industrial Revolution in Britain, 1750–1850<sup>10</sup>

It is often assumed that the woman worker was produced by the Industrial Revolution, and that since that time women have taken an increasing share in the world's work. This theory, however, is quite unsupported by facts... for centuries, under the handcraft and domestic systems, the greater part of [women's] work was carried on in the home and there taken for granted. It was only when new developments brought about the separation of home and workshop that a far greater number of women were compelled to follow their work and become wage earners in the outside world...<sup>11</sup>

Thus does Ivy Pinchbeck open her *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution*, with a ringing declaration of the fact that women have always worked. It is a fact of great consequence for our understanding of the social impact of industrial development in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England: to what extent and in precisely what ways did such development disrupt and reshape family life after 1750? How were women's activities and opportunities recast by the profound transformations in the economy? Yet it is a fact that has repeatedly been forgotten with disturbing ease; indeed, scholars and social policy-makers alike have proven curiously resistant to hearing it, with the result that the moment at which women first 'really' entered the workplace is forever being rediscovered.<sup>12</sup> The total wars of the twentieth century have long been a perennial favourite for the title. But the Industrial Revolution remains the key moment at which women were thought to have been torn from a life of non-productive wifely and maternal duty and thrown into the insatiable maw of industrial capitalism.<sup>13</sup> As Ivy Pinchbeck demonstrates in telling (and beautifully told) detail, the work that women performed in nineteenth-century factories (particularly textile mills, but also in food production) was often a reconfiguration of the labour they had performed in their own homes for centuries – spinning, weaving, clothing production, cheesemaking, market gardening and the raising of pigs and poultry. The massive entry of women into England's first manufactories is thus more usefully understood as a physical relocation of working women, consequence of the separation of home and work that the development of industrial capitalism entailed.

Pinchbeck opens her story with a fine-grained analysis of women's labour within the traditional agrarian world of estate, village and small town community that was 1750s England. The economy was an overwhelmingly agricultural one, with land forming the basis of wealth, status and power in society. Those small industries that did exist were entirely bound up with the agricultural economy, and the vast majority of working women and men depended on the land, either

directly or indirectly, as the prime source of their livelihood. In an economy structured by the harvest, by local markets and fairs, and by various cottage industries whose production could fit into the agrarian rhythms of life (weaving and spinning, lacemaking, glovemaking), women worked in or near their homes, tilling small garden plots, raising chickens, pigs and geese, making cheese and butter, grazing animals, gathering wood for fuel, working at cottage crafts and participating in the harvest, whose heavy labours demanded all available hands, male and female, adult and child. For in a world where women and children were expected to earn their own keep, and men's wages were based on an assumption that they did so, all but the very wealthiest families demanded the active participation of all members, with the exception of the tiniest children, in maintaining the family economy.

From about 1760 on, the basic structures of this agrarian economy were to be shaken, and ultimately overturned, by the activity of large landlords, who began to increase the pace and scope of enclosure, consolidating formerly open fields, pastures and wastes into large fenced-in units that were more economical to farm. This process of consolidation allowed large landowners to adopt more intensive, rationalized agricultural techniques. But the effects on smallholders were often disastrous, as their wealthier neighbours absorbed not only the lands of many a small farm but also great swatches of once commonly used meadows, pastures and woods. Even for those smallholders who managed to retain their plots, loss of access to these collective resources rapidly undermined their already precarious economic base.

Ivy Pinchbeck reveals to her readers the differential impact of this 'capitalist revolution' on the land for women of the wealthy, versus those of the smallholding classes. Thus, the enclosure and more intensive farming of large fields swelled profits and produced rising standards of comfort among the wealthier farmers. And this new prosperity led their wives gradually to withdraw from the everyday management of dairy, brewery, poultry and kitchen garden in favour of more leisured pursuits that would allow them to emulate the gentry: 'a Farmer, now become a Gentleman by swallowing up the farms of his neighbours, would be much affronted to have it even supposed that he would concern himself about such *small matters* [as raising livestock],' wrote one observer of the changing rural scene in 1800, 'and the fine lady, his wife, would faint at the idea of attending at market, like her mother or grandmother, with a basket of butter, pork, roasting pigs, or poultry, on her arm.'<sup>14</sup> Gone were the days when the prosperous farmwife undertook to support the household out of the profits of her own domain (livestock, dairy, poultry, orchard and garden), for as Pinchbeck pithily remarked, 'the Farmer's wife now drove, not indeed to market, but to an Assembly in a post chaise.' Her withdrawal from productive labour cost the wealthy farmer's wife her former economic independence. Yet, as Pinchbeck is careful to remind us, this loss

of economic independence did not entail any material hardship and, indeed, was seen to represent a real advance on the social scale.

Once again, and not for the last time, a newly leisured wife became a marker of recently acquired social status. It was quite the opposite for the wives of those small farmers who had lost access to open pastures and woods, or, worse yet, any hold on the land at all. Indeed, the impact of agriculture's 'capitalist revolution' was no less than catastrophic for those hundreds of thousands of smallholding families, reduced to abject poverty by the loss of their lands. Women who had once earned their keep by raising animals, making cheese and cultivating kitchen gardens were now forced into long hours of domestic industrial production, at wages so low they generally had to be supplemented by parish assistance, or into the great gangs of women and children agricultural labourers who were hired out by the day or the week to work on the newly consolidated fields of large landowners. As the supply of day labourers generally exceeded the demand, wages were minimal and employers did not hesitate to use the cheaper labour of women and children to drive down the rates paid to male day labourers. Indeed, sometimes, they replaced those men altogether on tasks such as hoeing turnips and other root crops, which women and children performed just as well, if not better than men, and at half the wages.<sup>15</sup>

Work in the gangs was not only poorly paid, but the conditions of work were also deeply fatiguing, even physically injurious, especially to the bodies of child gang labourers: long hikes of as much as seven or eight miles each way to reach the fields, followed by nine hours' heavy labouring (seven during the shorter days of winter) in all seasons and all weathers. 'I'm forced to let my daughter go, else I'm very much against it,' testified the mother of an 11-year-old girl before the 1843 Parliamentary Commission on Women and Children in Agriculture. Her daughter had been working as a gang labourer since the age of nine:

She has complained of a pain in her side very often; they [gang foremen] drive them along – force them along – they make them work very hard. Gathering stones has hurt my girl's back at times. Pulling turnips is the hardest work; they get such a hold of the ground with their roots; when the land's strong it's as much as we can do sometimes to get 'em out, pull as hard as we can pull. It blisters their hands so that they can hardly touch anything... My girl went 5 miles yesterday to her work, turniping. She set off between seven and eight; she walked; had a piece of bread before she went; she did not stop work in the middle of the day; ate nothing till she left off; she came home between 3 and 4 o'clock. Their walks are worse than their work; she is sometimes so tired, she can't eat no victuals when she comes home.<sup>16</sup>

Agricultural revolution on the land, followed by the gradual transfer of industrial production from home to factory, thus entailed deep misery for those generations

who lived through this profound transformation of the English economy. For women, in particular, and especially married ones, the initial stages of this transformation destroyed most opportunities for employment at home. Only later, with the development of large-scale manufacturing in the last quarter of the eighteenth century would new opportunities arise, as their daughters and granddaughters eventually found new employment outside their homes, in the first 'manufactories' of the dawning industrial economy.

Yet the passage of women and children from their hidden labours at home into new and more public spaces of production was met with great ambivalence. Perhaps this should not surprise us; after all, the 'dark, satanic mills' were England's most visible symbol of a dawning industrial economy whose apparent impact on social life (notably the alleged dismemberment of working-class families) gave rise to great public anxiety. Inevitably, then, the transfer of women and children workers from domestic industry into the new mills nourished the popular Victorian myth that women and children were industry's first and most vulnerable victims, sacrificed to the new industrial regime's boundless appetite for labour. One of the most original aspects of *Women and the Industrial Revolution* lies in the author's capacity to look past the alarmist discourse on industry's dissolution of working-class family life in order to evaluate more coolly the actual impact of industrial labour on the lives and fortunes of working women, in relation to those of their mothers and grandmothers. After a thorough survey of the full range of women's occupations within the domestic and industrial systems, Ivy Pinchbeck finds that, contrary to Victorian stereotypes, the Industrial Revolution was, on the whole, beneficial to women. For those women who remained in the home, it relieved them of the 'drudgery and monotony that characterised much of the hand labour previously performed in connection with industrial work under the domestic system.'<sup>17</sup> And for those women who worked outside the home, the Industrial Revolution ultimately delivered better conditions, a greater variety of openings and, most importantly, an improved status as independent wage earners.

Ivy Pinchbeck thus wrote against the popular vision of the pre-industrial world as a kind of golden age, where families had laboured together, in harmony and close to nature, before the arrival of industry tore them apart and condemned them to labour in isolation from one another, bound no longer to nature but to the pitiless rhythms of the machine. Without downplaying the real hardships that the industrial economy imposed on workers of both sexes – the long hours, low wages and poor working conditions that gnawed away at the health and well-being of England's early industrial proletariat – Pinchbeck nonetheless refuses the catastrophic narrative of industrial labour as a descent into hell and instead resolutely compares industrial conditions for women with those that had previously prevailed in smallholding agriculture and domestic industry. Here, she

never allows her reader to forget how monotonous and laborious were the basic tasks of assuring a family's subsistence with only the hand technologies of the pre-industrial world. Nor was she inclined to minimize the highly problematic position of economic dependence that women's implication in the pre-modern family economy entailed. For if the gendered and asymmetrical complementarities of the domestic system (in which women were crucial, but nonetheless second-class workers) assured married women fairly stable employment in their homes, it often spelled extreme poverty for single women and those widows or abandoned wives who were thrown upon their own resources.

*Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* thus offers a nuanced portrait of the occupational changes that, in Pinchbeck's estimation, played a central role in improving women's social position over the period 1850–1950. For if 'political enfranchisement has been represented as the crowning achievement of the emancipation of women, [t]he occupational changes which played so large a part in their emancipation ... have been curiously neglected ...'.<sup>18</sup> In redressing the historiographical imbalance between the political and social histories of English women, Pinchbeck established many of the concepts and categories that would, 40 years hence, shape women's history as it established itself in the great feminist revival of the 1960s and 1970s: the notion that productive labour outside the home is the key to women's autonomy; the idea that women's political emancipation in the twentieth century was grounded in far more fundamental social and economic developments that, over the long term, lifted women's socio-economic status relative to men's; the separation of home and work as a consequence of industrial capitalism (with all that that implies regarding women workers' 'double burden' of labour in both home and factory); the careful distinctions of class made between bourgeois and working-class women in the analysis of industrialism's impact on women (with each woman's class determined by that of her husband).

Each of these insights, concepts and distinctions contributed to the construction of women as objects of social analysis. And this, in turn, allowed Pinchbeck to explore not only the various ways that different groups of women (married and single, bourgeois and working class) were affected by the upheavals of industrial development, but also the crucial role that women played in shaping the nature of that development. In addition, her thoughtful exploration of the shifting sexual divisions of labour across the agrarian and industrial revolutions reveals the relational nature of gender as a category of social being. Although Pinchbeck herself never uses the term 'gender', her analysis of the shift from male to female (and child) labour in the hoeing of root crops, or of the gendered switchovers that attended the mechanization of spinning and weaving (the traditionally female task of spinning in the home became a skilled male job in the

textile mills, whereas the mixed, but predominantly male task of handloom weaving was instantly feminized with its mechanization and transfer to the factory), show an acute sensitivity to the construction and reconstruction of gender roles in relation to particular forms of work. In a period when the forms of work were undergoing radical transformation, who got hired for specific work roles depended largely on how individual employers perceived the particular qualities of men and women, girls and boys. For strength and stamina, resistance to monotony and docility were qualities that, in the eyes of most employers, were possessed in unequal measure by the two sexes, with men winning on the former count and women on the latter. Forty years before the women's movement was to put the sexual division of labour on the table as one of *the* major feminist issues, Ivy Pinchbeck had already begun shaping the analytic tools that would allow scholarship on this topic to move forward.

*Women and the Industrial Revolution* thus places women squarely with the stream of events and structures that were to shape the modern industrial economy. As a consequence, women are revealed as both actors in history and as acted upon by history; no more and no less subject to the great social and economic forces of the era than were the men alongside whom they lived and laboured. As Kerry Hamilton wrote in her introduction to the 1981 edition of this great classic, 'women's history owes Ivy Pinchbeck a great debt.'<sup>19</sup> It was a debt that would only come due some 35 to 40 years hence, when, in a period of renewed feminist militancy, women's history ceased to be the preoccupation of a small band of dedicated pioneers and become instead the collective mission of an entire generation.<sup>20</sup>

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## Endnotes

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- 1 Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (London, 1930, reprinted by Virago, 1981); Mary Beard, *Woman as a Force in History: A Study in Tradition and Realities* (New York, 1946); Léon Abensour, *Histoire générale du féminisme des origines à nos jours* (Paris, 1921). For an illuminating discussion of writing about women before the turn of the twentieth century, see Gianna Pomata, 'History, Particular and Universal: On Reading Some Recent Women's History Textbooks', *Feminist Studies*, 19:1 (Spring 1993), 7–50.
- 2 Alice Clark, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1919); Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge, 1922); Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labour* (London, 1911).
- 3 As Natalie Zemon Davis points out in her illuminating article, "'Women's History" in Transition: The European Case', *Feminist Studies*, 3:3/4 (Spring/Summer 1976), 83–103 (reprinted in Joan W. Scott (ed.),

- Feminism and History* (Oxford, 1996), 79–104), social history as a form goes back to the eighteenth century. Moreover, social historians of both sexes, from William Alexander to Friedrich Engels to Georgina Hill, were concerned to expand the boundaries of their discipline so as to include the activities of women, questions of family life, etc. Indeed, a number of (generally male) scholars, notably Engels and J.J. Bachofen, used the relations between the sexes as a way to characterize different stages of human society. (Using male–female relations as a benchmark for ‘civilization’ was, of course, a popular way to talk about the unevolved state of colonized peoples, and so justify European rule or ‘tutelage’).
- 4 On this point, see Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain. Margaret McMillan, 1860–1931* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1990), especially her concluding chapter.
  - 5 Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History. Eileen Power, 1889–1940* (Cambridge, 1996), 9.
  - 6 A number of the women who studied at the LSE also belonged to the Fabian Socialist’s Women’s Group. See Bessie L. Hutchins, ‘The Working Life of Women’, Fabian Women’s Group Series, *Fabian Tracts*, 157 (London, 1911); and Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry* (London, 1915); Lilian Knowles, *The Industrial and Commercial Revolutions in Great Britain During the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1921); Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1925); and George, *England in Transition* (London, 1931); Mabel Buer, *Health, Wealth and Population in the Early Days of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1926).
  - 7 Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).
  - 8 Pinchbeck herself studied with two pioneers in the fledgling field of economic history: Lilian Knowles (1849–1929: the first woman to hold a chair in economic history in Britain) and Eileen Power (1889–1940: renowned medievalist, co-founder of the British Economic History Society, founder of the *Economic History Review*, and appointed to the LSE’s Chair in Economic History in 1934). A fellowship from Mrs Bernard Shaw allowed Pinchbeck to complete her manuscript. The LSE was a kind of social-science think-tank, where history was understood to be a science that one pursued with larger goals of social reform in mind. (This at a time when the social sciences were just finding their feet as disciplines.) Founded by a group of Fabian socialists in 1895, the LSE was conceived as a laboratory of social reform and was particularly invested in the higher education of women, as well as the scholarly investigation of women’s social, political and economic condition. It also drew students from a broader range of social and cultural backgrounds, and from a wider age range, than one normally found in the university milieu of *fin-de-siècle* Britain. See Maxine Berg, ‘The First Women Economic Historians’, *Economic History Review*, 45:2 (1992), 308–29; and Berg, ‘Eileen Power

- and Women's History', *Gender & History*, 2 (1994), 265–74. On the LSE's links to adult education and the Workers' Education Association, see Berg, *A Woman in History*.
- 9 On the contribution that Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* made to subsequent historiography on women and work, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition', and Olwen Hufton, 'Femmes/hommes: une question subversive', *Passés recomposés. Champs et chantiers d'histoire* (Paris, 1995), 235–42. See also Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History*, esp. 9.
  - 10 Drawn from the title of Sylvie Schweitzer's comprehensive survey, *Les Femmes ont toujours travaillé. Une histoire du travail des femmes au XIXe et XXe siècles* (Paris, 2002).
  - 11 Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, 1.
  - 12 See Schweitzer, *Les Femmes ont toujours travaillé*, for an eloquent exposition of this persistent amnesia regarding the pervasiveness of women's labour in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France.
  - 13 The term 'Industrial Revolution' refers to the vast social, demographic and economic changes that were bound up with the acceleration in economic and technological development from about 1750 on. The term was first coined by Toynbee, and while the 'revolutionary' status of these changes has more recently been contested by economic and labour historians, the notion that this period saw an industrial 'revolution' still held sway in 1930 (and, indeed, would continue to do so into the 1970s).
  - 14 J. S. Girdler, *Observations of the Pernicious Consequences of Forestalling, Regrating, and Engrossing* (1800), 9, cited in Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, 34.
  - 15 Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, 59.
  - 16 *Report on Women and Children in Agriculture* (1843), vol. XII, 224, cited in Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, 89.
  - 17 Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, 4.
  - 18 Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, Preface to the 2nd edn, October 1968.
  - 19 Kerry Hamilton, 'Introduction to the Third Edition', in Pinchbeck, *Women Workers*, 1981.
  - 20 Maxine Berg notes that post-World War II Britain saw a sharp drop in the number of women historians holding academic posts, and comments wryly on the post-war 'loss' of the intellectual legacy of Pinchbeck's generation. Berg, *A Woman in History*, 12.