

FINDING SYLVIA THRUPP

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In this issue, we are honoring a woman we might claim as a medievalist foremother, Dr. Sylvia Thrupp, a scholar of economic history.¹ Thrupp is particularly known for founding the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (*CSSH*), for her work on the guild system in medieval England, and for her pioneering work in interdisciplinary studies.

Born in England, but raised in British Columbia, Canada, Thrupp was educated in both Canada and England, and taught in Toronto and British Columbia early in her career. This background had a profound impact on her approach to medieval studies, as Caroline Barron discusses in her article in this issue. The Guggenheim fellowship she secured allowed Thrupp to pursue her scholarship in the United States for a limited time, but also, ultimately, resulted in her securing a job at the University of Chicago, the stage

of her career examined by Joel Rosenthal. From there, she was able to move to the University of Michigan, where she remained until her retirement in 1974. While there, she not only expanded her beloved journal, but also she had the opportunity to be a mentor to graduate students. While some students were nervous around the forthright and opinionated Thrupp, many others developed a close relationship with her, spending time at her summer house, working with her at *CSSH*, or simply discussing topics over coffee. Former colleague Dr. Raymond Grew, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Michigan, recalls that Thrupp generally spoke of her students with “real affection,” and was truly committed to them in terms of their education.² In her article, Barbara Hanawalt, a former student of Thrupp’s, agrees overall with Grew’s perspective; however, she adds to the discussion the dimension of Thrupp as a specifically

feminist mentor, reaching some thought-provoking conclusions.

These articles cover the main portions of Thrupp's life and career, so I sought to fill in the gaps, seeking insight to her character, or a glimpse of what was "behind the curtain," so to speak. Of particular interest to me were Thrupp's efforts with *CSSH*, certainly mentioned in each of the articles, but not the focus of examination. Further, I sought to understand Thrupp's apparent rejection of feminist principles, particularly after reading in Barron's piece that she wrote to Walter Sage about an "anti-feminist feeling" she encountered in the US.³ This and her apparent sorrow over exclusions from certain academic societies and functions seemed to clash curiously with her vehement denials of feminist principles. Rosenthal purports a deliberate "underplaying" of events on her part.⁴ Hanawalt more unequivocally states that Thrupp did not feel discriminated against.⁵ Grew, on the other hand, simply believes that she felt gender was an unimportant category in the academic world, and that feminism simply wasted

valuable research time and effort. Thus my quest was born: to discuss Thrupp's work as a "foremother" and pioneer.

It is, perhaps, as a pioneer in the field of interdisciplinary work that Thrupp is best known. She strove to find the common thread of conversation among scholarly disciplines, and the social sciences in particular. She had a great enthusiasm for finding the relationship between disparate topics with congruent possibilities. Grew contends that she "invented" urban studies, putting her gift for "identifying interesting topics" to good use. This talent was especially helpful to her in establishing *CSSH*. Established in 1958, prior to her arrival at Michigan, for the first several years, the journal was a one-woman operation. "She did it all," Grew reports. Determined to make her journal a success, Thrupp invested long hours and cashed in personal favors to make the first issues substantive and inventive. *CSSH* was forged from Thrupp's personal strength of character. "We have an archive of all of her correspondence," affirms Grew, "and it makes for a fascinating

read.” Thrupp pounded the pavement seeking start-up funds, and every member of the original Editorial Committee was a personal friend of hers. The archived letters contain the records of Thrupp wheedling money from various sources, such as the University of Chicago and Harvard University library. Other letters detail Thrupp’s quest to establish the initial Editorial Board, as well as her solicitations of article contributions. While Thrupp’s undertaking might seem exhausting to many of us, she thrived on constant chaotic activity, and soon *CSSH* was a much-admired publication.

In establishing and running her journal, Thrupp was truly committed to her vision of the scholarly community. Though the initial issues of *CSSH* focused primarily on history, sociology, and anthropology—a tendency that remains today—Thrupp welcomed varied approaches to familiar and unfamiliar topics. She sought to establish a common discourse among scholars, what she saw as an effort to create a “social history” of the medieval world. Basing her approach in the

methodology of historical economic development, seeing these techniques as the bridge to the other social sciences, and the eventual link to other areas, such as the humanities and fine arts. Grew contends that “[b]y way of *CSSH*, her influence extended throughout the social sciences in Europe and North America—the journal’s vitality a reflection of her judgment and energy, her joy in scholarship, the range of her intellectual interests, and her remarkable openness to new ideas.”⁶ Her goal was to move forward in terms of finding a common answer to questions of social history. I asked Grew how these principles of Thrupp’s worked in tandem with her interest in the lower classes. Her commitment to what he calls the “science of discovery,” that is the social science of discovery, led her to “sparkling ideas” that uncovered the common thread that united many ideas. In the course of this pursuit, Thrupp often took on issues of marginality, more out of necessity and thorough scholarship than an attempt to champion the underdog. Though certainly not hierarchical or snobbish,

Thrupp approached questions of class much like she approached those involving race or sex—she dealt with them as necessary to establish her interdisciplinary vision, but not as a matter of principle—perhaps a somewhat jaded view, but also an efficient one.

Thrupp was also hardnosed when it came to *CSSH*. Though the journal had an Editorial Committee, Thrupp retained a firm control over the contents throughout her career. Grew recalled one particular instance that he says epitomizes Thrupp's dealings with journal submissions. It seems that a colleague of theirs had left a copy of an article in Thrupp's university mailbox one morning. Shortly after lunch, the article reappeared in his mailbox. Confused, the man took the article to Thrupp personally, explaining that this was his submission to *CSSH*, and that he wanted to make sure she had it. "There's no need to give it back to me," Thrupp said briskly, "it's been rejected." This seems to be quite a difference perspective than the one we read about in Hanawalt's account, perhaps not unlikely for a woman of such strong character

and convictions. On another occasion, upon receiving a copy of Hayden White's book to review in *CSSH*, she proceeded to go on for some length about interesting new work in the field of cognitive development and creativity studies. When asked what this had to do with White's book, she unblinkingly replied, "well, it's obvious Hayden White thinks only with the right side of his brain!" (Apparently, White lacked logic.) Thrupp was rarely afraid to share her perceptions, or to enforce her particular vision of interdisciplinary studies, surely an admirable trait. Underneath the crustiness lay a heart of gold. Thrupp had a wicked tongue, and a sharp wit, but was a lot of fun. Thrupp had a "real talent for making and retaining friends," declares Grew, and many of her former acquaintances speak warmly of her, sharing stories about her frightening driving skills, parties at her summer house, and her girlish enthusiasm about her marriage in her 80s to fellow medievalist, Joseph Strayer. A number of these acquaintances include former students as well as colleagues from around the world.

It is certainly true that many of the women we would refer to as our foremothers did not consider themselves feminists, or in some cases, even pioneers or “special.” Yet, looking at Thrupp’s life and accomplishments led me to wonder about her celebrated disavowal of feminist principles. And in light of the comments reported in Barron’s article, as well as Thrupp’s espousal of interdisciplinary studies and focus on lower classes, I was more intrigued. I anticipated that Thrupp’s involvement with discipline development and cross-disciplinary growth had the chance to extend to feminist developments, even if covertly. Moreover, she accomplished a great deal in an era when educated women faced limited opportunities and challenges based on sex, readily overcoming these barriers. Yet, the word was that Thrupp regularly condemned feminists, believing that they fought the wrong war. “She was certainly pioneering and battling her whole life,” Grew pointed out, “but not as a woman—she battled for a different kind of history.” Instead of fighting gender inequity, Thrupp

fought disciplinary inequity. She believed that the main barrier to better scholarship was based on methodology, and not sex. Grew hastens to say that Thrupp certainly encouraged her female colleagues and students, but also that she felt there were no inherent qualities in race or gender that should inspire debate or warrant special circumstances. “These categories simply didn’t exist for her,” says Grew. Thrupp’s academic world was a pure world—a world that avoided messy details about social categories, and concentrated solely on theoretical debates and philosophical ideas. Was this a defense mechanism, and outright rejection, or simply a way of remaining outside the debate?

This quasi-anti-feminist stance seems a bit perplexing in a woman whom many of us feel was a groundbreaking medieval feminist foremother, and more disconcerting yet considering her own musings on anti-feminist sentiments working against her. Certainly, Thrupp was aware of impediments she faced as a woman, and was hindered by her sex at a

number of stages in her career. Yet eventually it was her sex that helped her out—when she was seeking a position at the University of Michigan, the chair created an endowed position, Alice Freeman Palmer Professor of History, for her using funds provided by an alumna donor, and further supported by the women’s alumni association. In fact, the position continues to be held by female scholars to this day. Grew also contends that Thrupp was aided by her choice of discipline, as economics was one of the few social sciences in which women scholars held a prominent place. Whatever the case, Thrupp came to resist not only the label feminist, but also affiliation with the political position. “She simply wasn’t sympathetic to feminist movements,” Grew admits, “probably not what you wanted to hear.” No, not exactly what I wanted to hear, but fascinating, nonetheless. Furthermore, just because Thrupp herself eschewed feminist principles doesn’t mean that we can’t learn from her example, as well as from her scholarly work. A feminist doesn’t have to label herself or himself as

such to be a role model. This might be the most important lesson to remember. Disavowal of a political stance cannot overturn Thrupp’s career accomplishments. Rosenthal maintains that Thrupp may not have been a role model, but I’m not so sure. Being a well educated, outspoken, successful woman is certainly something to admire.

REFLECTIONS ON THRUPP

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I am not alone in this contention, either. Thrupp has become, whether she would have liked the position or not, a feminist foremother, particularly in Canadian academia, but also as a pioneer in the field of economics. She is listed, for instance, in the *Bio-Bibliography of Economic and Social History*, as "a pioneer of social history and first female president of the Economic History Association in 1973-1974."⁷ This last item I found interesting, especially since no one else mentioned it! Robert Whaples also indirectly labels her a pioneer in his retrospective examination of the *Journal of Economic History*. He notes that the number of female-authored contributions, while always relatively low, "disappeared completely" between the years of 1965 and 1969, linking this to the popularity of cliometrics.⁸ Further, he found that "only two women, Sylvia Thrupp and Anna Schwartz, had papers published in this Journal both before 1965 and after 1969."⁹ Having her name singled out in such a manner, pointedly places Thrupp in a feminist position, whether or not she would have appreciated such a space.

Even more emphatically, historians of Canadian academe have positioned Thrupp as a pioneering feminist academic—again, whether or not Thrupp would have wished this to be her legacy. For instance, Donald Wright, in his look at the gendered history of British Columbian academics, repeatedly points out that Thrupp, like other women in the field, was treated disrespectfully.¹⁰ Women, including Thrupp, were given limited instructorships, or one-year contracts, instead of tenure track positions.¹¹ This was primarily due to male faculty’s opinions about women’s intellectual capacities rather than mere coincidence or even scarcity of female Ph.D.s. Wright’s careful examination of letters, journals, and official papers—all stored in public repositories—reveals a telling picture. Men simply did not consider women to be worthy academic colleagues: “boys have ‘more speculative minds—more imagination,’”¹² “the capacity for political thought, he believed, was masculine,” “indecisiveness was feminine; decisiveness, masculine,”¹³ and so forth. Today’s scholars clearly do not

share this perspective, and often laud Thrupp as an excellent scholar and a groundbreaker in the Canadian university system. Indeed, many share the opinion of William Bruneau, who refers to Thrupp as one of “UBC’s most remarkable scholars [...] a writer and researcher of high international importance.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, however, this attitudinal shift did not occur early enough in Thrupp’s career to secure her a permanent position in Canada. Instead, she undertook a series of year-to-year contracts—a situation Chad Reimer terms “exploitative.” Reimer goes on to note that Walter Sage, so often referred to as one of Thrupp’s mentors, was disconcerted by her obvious intelligence, and alarmed by the thought of welcoming into a department where he ruled, took advantage of Thrupp’s familial situation. Sage knew Thrupp needed to be near her sickly father, and used that vulnerability to entrap her into a cycle of one-year positions.¹⁵ Facing these attitudes daily surely made Thrupp more determined to succeed, building upon her already strong personality. Whether or not this resolve was a consciously

feminist act is of little consequence. The adversity she faced was directly linked to gender, and her actions and reactions were interpreted on that basis by others.

Her longtime colleague and friend, Raymond Grew, offers up an encapsulating vision of Thrupp: “Sylvia had a true gift for seeing connections across topics and categories in ways no one else could conceptualize.” This vision of her seems to capture the essence of a woman who was a bundle of contradictions, and spent her life building bridges between them. A truly loyal friend, she was also sharp-tongued and waspish. An energetic and conscientious scholar, she could be a pedestrian teacher. An indifferent feminist, Thrupp is touted as a pioneer. Grew calls her a “tough minded idealist.” Indeed, it is this last that allows us to claim Thrupp as a medieval feminist foremother. She was an idealist. When Thrupp said gender had no impact on scholarship, she meant that wholeheartedly. Caught between her own principles (being a woman made no difference to her

work) and society’s viewpoint (being a woman lessened her intellectually), Thrupp became a reluctant feminist by default. She knew that many of the challenges she faced originated with her sex. By (publicly) refusing to acknowledge this, she also repudiated male prejudice, indirectly supporting other female scholars. These varied dimensions add up to a woman who changed the path of the study of social history—a true pioneer, who just happened to be female. It would be difficult not to acknowledge the important contributions that Thrupp provided for the fields encompassed by medieval studies today, and indeed for the revolutionary concept of multidisciplinary scholarship as a whole. She sincerely deserves her place of honor in this issue as a respected medievalist (feminist) foremother.

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END NOTES

¹ For an overview of female scholars in the field, see Maxine Berg, “The First Women Economic Historians” *The Economic History Review*, ns. 45.2(1992): 308-329.

² Raymond Grew, telephone interview, 10 April 2006. All references to Grew are taken from this interview unless otherwise indicated.

³ See Barron, p. 23 in this issue.

⁴ See Rosenthal, p. 35 in this issue.

⁵ See Hanawalt, p. 44 in this issue.

⁶ Raymond Grew, "In Memorium," *Perspectives* (Newsletter of the American Historical Association), March 2000; archived at <<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2000/0003/0003mem6.cfm>>.

See *Bio-Bibliography of Economic and Social History*, 4th ed. Ed. D. A. Farne. (Manchester UP, 2005), p. 199.

⁷ As with many scholarly definitions, the term cliometrics is the subject of debate. However, the general definition is, "the application of economic theory and quantitative techniques to describe and explain historical events." Comprehensive data sets and statistics are essential tools of the trade. The field originated ca. 1957 as an outgrowth of the Economic History Association in conjunction with the NBER Conference on Income and Wealth. See the Cliometric Society homepage at <<http://eh.net/Clio/index-About.html>>.

⁸ See Robert Whaples, "A Quantitative History of the *Journal of Economic History* and the Cliometric Revolution," *The Journal of Economic History* 51.2(1991): 289-301; p. 297. His overall numbers about female contributors are interesting as well: "Roughly 5 percent of the pages of this Journal were written by women during its first decade. This decreased in the early 1950s, but reached a new high of nearly 8 percent in the early

1960s" (297). Whaples considered the 1970s a "boom period for women," and by the 1980s, women contributed "about 15 percent" of the pieces. (297) Seemingly, 40 years to triple female-authored articles is good progress.

⁹ See Donald Wright, "Gender and the Professionalization of History in English Canada before 1960," *The Canadian Historical Review* 81.1(2000): 29-67.

¹⁰ Worryingly, this situation is not that much different today. A recent MLA survey revealed that "candidates hired for full-time non-tenure-track positions were 66.2% women and 33.8% men." See the Report on the MLA's 2004 Survey of Hiring Departments archived at <http://www.ade.org/reports/hiring_survey2004.htm>. A similar situation exists in History. AHA surveys reveal that "[in 1995] women held 26 percent of part-time positions which represents a notable decline from the 41 percent they held in 1993." See Barbara N. Ramusack, "Good Practices and Common Goals: The Conference on Part-Time and Adjunct Faculty," *Perspectives* (January 1998), archived <<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1998/9801/9801PRO.CFM>>. Unfortunately, that trend did not hold true through later surveys, which may be accessed through the AHA website <www.historians.org>.

¹¹ William Aiken, McMaster University. See Wright, "Gender and Professionalization," p. 48.

¹² Frank Underhill, University of Saskatchewan. See Wright, "Gender and Professionalization," p. 48.

¹³ Arthur Lower, University of

Toronto. See Wright, "Gender and Professionalization," p. 48.

¹⁴See William Bruneau, "Toward a New Collective Biography: The University of British Columbia Professoriate, 1915-1945," *Canadian Journal of Education* 19.1(1994): 65-79; p. 69; n. 21, pp. 77-78. See also Alison Prentice, "Bluestockings, Feminists, or Women Workers? A Preliminary Look at Women's Employment at the University of Toronto," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 2(1991): 231-61, wherein she names Thrupp among the leading medievalists of North America.

¹⁵See Chad Reimer, *The Making of British Columbia History: Historical Writing and Institutions, 1784-1958* (Diss., York U), 1995, pp. 380-82.



[. . .] Take an apple and hollow it out and place it on the ear, and if there is any worm, it will come out.

— from the *On Treatments for Women* section of the *Trotula* (edited and translated by Monica H. Green)

