

similar sources. Laget emphasized the obstetrical complications that often occurred as a result of poor health and how traditional birthing beliefs and practices restricted the mother. Gélis, on the other hand, argues that the rituals and comradeship surrounding childbirth empowered the mother. While Laget painted an especially bleak picture of women in childbirth, Gélis's portrait may be overly sanguine.

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Elsbeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby and Helen Wilcox, eds. — *Her Own Life: Autobiographical writings by seventeenth-century Englishwomen*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. Pp. v, 250.

How do women describe their own lives? under what circumstances? how can we use such writings to better understand the lives of women in the past? These are the questions repeatedly raised by this collection of women's autobiographical writings from the seventeenth century. In presenting these works in a format accessible to the student, the editors of this collection have performed a great service to all those interested in women's writings and women's lives in the period.

The first difficulty that is met in producing a collection of this sort is selection. There are many texts available from which the editors selected a dozen. They cover a wide social range — from Lady Anne Clifford and Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, to the Quakers Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers and the putative German princess, Mary Carleton. Some of the selections are predictable, but more of them are unfamiliar; few are available in modern editions. Even with Alice Thornton, whose autobiography is familiar from its Surtees Society edition, the editors choose to print an earlier unpublished version: it is less dramatic, but says more about Thornton's early life, and is often more emotionally compelling. Aside from Mary Carleton, whose *Case* offers her defense against charges of bigamy and deception, the non-elite women included write from a religious perspective: Ann Collins's poetic autobiography is part of her *Divine Songs and Meditations*, while other women range from the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel to the reluctant Presbyterian Susanna Parr.

Even with the common religious themes, this is a very miscellaneous collection. The editors provide great assistance with their introduction, which discusses women's writing in the period, the political and religious context as well as theoretical issues relating to writing an autobiography. They explain the ideas of both Lacan and the British "self" theorists clearly and concisely; while aware of the role of narrative in constructing experience, the editors note the dangers of collapsing the categories of "life", "fiction", and "text". Finally, the introduction identifies common themes that can connect the very different lives and stories presented — the need of authors to share their experience with others, the common female perspective which includes an experience of oppression and a hostile world, consciousness of writing as an important process and, above all, a concern for truth. The introduction is one of the best to such a collection that I have read: it is clear, succinct (25 pages), and theoretically sophisticated without being pretentious. It provides a useful set of ideas for approaching the material which follows. Each individual selection is preceded by a further brief

introductory section — rarely more than three pages — which discusses the author, whatever is known of her life, the context in which she wrote, and whatever other information is relevant. It also notes any textual problems. It is helpful to have the individual introduction separate from the general one, and saves the reader a good bit of flipping back and forth.

Most of the works reproduced here were originally published in the seventeenth century, with the exception of Lady Anne Clifford's diary and Alice Thornton's memoirs. Although the editors are primarily interested in them from the perspective of women's writing, they are historically revealing as well. Susanna Parr's account of her membership in a Baptist congregation reveals the ambivalence of a gathered community about the participation of women. Parr asserts her own unwillingness to be too active in church government: as a woman, government is not her place. The minister, however, repeatedly demanded her opinion — which she is then criticized for offering. The tensions between a belief in equality before God and social conventions are startling.

One of the most important contributions this book makes to our understanding of women in early modern England is its repeated reminders — both in the texts themselves and the editorial material — that women of seventeenth-century England had very different interests and obsessions from those of the twentieth century. Sarah Davy's conversion narrative, for instance, describes her feelings of responsibility when her infant brother died in her care; she also records that though during her mother's life she had been "subject to divers bodily infirmities", after her mother's death, God "was pleased then wholly to take away my distemper" (169). For Davy, these are landmarks on her journey to salvation, and the psychological interpretation we are tempted to give is not hers. Similarly, Hannah Allen sees her long period of melancholy as representing not depression, but loss of faith. Over and over again, these texts remind us of the importance of religion to seventeenth-century women. Whatever other interpretations we might wish to offer, we must acknowledge and understand the explanations that these women would have given.

This is an important and useful collection. It makes accessible selections from a range of writings, and though many published in the seventeenth century, few have been published in this century. It is clearly designed for teaching. The major problem is that the materials have been excerpted, often from much longer works — usually religious — whose point is not autobiography. Reading these versions can be misleading, and serves to separate women's lives from the theological context in which they placed them, in spite of editorial attempts to explain the context. Any scholar will eventually have to go back to the originals. However, since few undergraduates would make it through one hundred fifty pages of a conversion narrative, we must be grateful to the editors for providing this fascinating glimpse into the lives and thinking of seventeenth-century English women. This collection is a good place to start any investigation of women's writings about themselves in seventeenth-century England.

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