

## Sex, religion, scholarship and politics

In 2004, questions about the historical consistency of the Roman Catholic church's teachings on clerical celibacy and other aspects of human sexuality are again in the news. These were equally sensitive issues in 1879, especially in such settings as the Roman Catholic school boards of New Brunswick, where the authorities preferred that children not be exposed to the information that parish clergy had been allowed to marry in tenth-century England. Historical scholars, on the other hand, were determined to treat such matters as research problems, and had discovered that "the secular clergy . . . were often married, despite the feeling which had gradually grown up in the Western Church that the clergy ought not to marry." This rather mild and judicious remark by Edith Thompson, on pages 27-8 of her 1873 *History of England* brought the competing values of religious doctrine and historical scholarship into conflict across transatlantic boundaries.

I first encountered Edith Thompson in the Macmillan Archive at the British Library, but my most pressing question about her was answered by the CIHM microfiche collection in the Leddy Library at my own University of Windsor. Edith Thompson (1848-1929) was one of the few women historians in the England of her day; she was the daughter of a lawyer and granddaughter of the Hull antislavery leader Thomas Perronet Thompson. Her mentor was Edward Augustus Freeman (1823-92), who served as Regius Professor of History at Oxford from 1884 to 1892. Like me, Freeman discovered Thompson by reading one of her letters. She was a school friend of his daughter Margaret, and the two eighteen-year-olds had been corresponding about ancient figures and modern historians. Edith Thompson subsequently became not only a friend of the Freeman family but a protégée of the historian. He preferred working with scholarly young women like Thompson: his friend John Richard Green teased him about keeping "an historic harem." When Macmillan asked Freeman to edit a Historical Course for Schools – a series of little books on the history of the western world – he entrusted the important (and lucrative) History of England to Edith Thompson. Her book outsold and outlived all others in the series, including Freeman's own *General Sketch of European History* (1872). An edition appeared under the Henry Holt Imprint in New York, in 1873, and was reprinted several times.

During 1879 – six years after her book was first published and with seventeen reprintings behind them – Thompson, Freeman and Alexander Macmillan were faced with a problem from an unlikely source, Canada, on a point of historical (and political) sensitivity, the celibacy of the clergy in the middle ages. The New Brunswick school authorities wished to adopt the book for use in the public schools of the province, but objected to the passage cited above. Freeman advised her not to revise, adding that "if you are to go patching this and that, just to please some absurd sectarian prejudice all round, why you or anybody else might have to write afresh everything that you have written." She agreed and Macmillan concurred – but what happened across the ocean, in New Brunswick?

Although it is easy enough to find the passage in question, on pages 27-8 of the little book, the correspondence in the British Library provides no resolution to my problem. Did the Macmillan Company, either of London or of Toronto, accede to the request, in order to supply the New Brunswick market? I thought it was quite possible that the stereotype plates for the edition used in New Brunswick might still have been altered.

Most of the 250,000 or so copies of Edith Thompson's *History of England* that were printed by the end of the nineteenth century have long since been "used up" by energetic school children (in one English boy's school, they used to ask "where's my Edith?"). Few "Ediths" made their way into library collections, fewer still survive until today, and Canadian editions must of course be sought in Canadian repositories. CIHM offered me four variants. The first two (CIHM 33962 and 56857) were published in Toronto by James Campbell and Son in 1878 and 1879, authorized for use in Ontario schools. CIHM 56142 appeared in 1880, also in Toronto, from the Canada Publishing Company. I was most interested in the fourth copy, CIHM 49055, which appears from the record to be published by Macmillan and Company in both "New Brunswick" (no city given) and London. However it is not Macmillan of Canada, but the unrelated Saint John firm of J. and A. McMillan whose name appears, alongside the imprint Macmillan and Company of London. The complexities were multiplying, rather than resolving! CIHM allowed me readily to check the pages in question, but as students of the history of the book in Canada will recognize, this episode raises complex research questions, including the possibility that these Canadian imprints might have been printed from the New York plates, with whatever revisions had been found desirable for that market. Such permutations, however, extend well beyond the boundaries of a brief article celebrating CIHM.

It is fitting, since Freeman and his "historical harem" were strong advocates of a newly "scientific" and rigorously document-based history, that their opinion prevailed over the sensitivities of the school authorities in Saint John, and that the passage about the medieval church remains intact in 49055 and indeed in all four CIHM copies as well as an 1897 London copy in my possession. I wonder how many students noticed the controversial passage?

Edith Thompson has been mentioned in a number of book reviews recently, because she is identified in Simon Winchester's *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (2003) as a very prolific, committed and competent, but retiring and stereotypically "Victorian" contributor to the Oxford English Dictionary. Thompson's letters to Macmillan, and letters from Freeman to her (preserved at the University of Hull)

offer a rounder and more robust image of a remarkable writer and scholar. I also wonder how many Canadian schoolgirls of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bereft as they were of women role models in so many aspects of life, noticed that their authoritative source on the all-important History of England was called Edith.

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