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Jocelyn Robson, *Elizabeth Heyrick: The Making of Anti-Slavery Campaigner* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2024). ISBN 9781399068383. Hardback, £25.

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A book review for Jocelyn Robson, *Elizabeth Heyrick: The Making of Anti-Slavery Campaigner* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2024).



In her new biography, *Elizabeth Heyrick: The Making of an Early Anti-Slavery Campaigner*, Jocelyn Robson crafts an accessible and engaging narrative of a radical campaigner whose life and contributions have long been strangely absent in broader histories of nineteenth-century English moral reform. Elizabeth Heyrick (1769–1831), a prolific pamphleteer and organiser, was a tireless advocate for labour reform, social welfare, and the immediate, not gradual, abolition of slavery across the British Empire. Divided across five sections spanning from 1760–1830, Robson’s biography provides crucial religious, economic, and social context for the world that prompted Heyrick’s activism. Deftly weaving familial details and episodes of interpersonal drama throughout the narrative of Heyrick’s developing reformist sensibilities, Jocelyn Robson repeatedly reminds the reader of the humanity behind the author whose work often made her appear larger than life.

An immediate strength of Robson’s work is the broader labour and family history she crafts for Elizabeth Heyrick’s extensive kinship networks. Born Elizabeth Coltman to Nonconformists Elizabeth and John Coltman of Leicester, Heyrick was early exposed to the ideals of religious toleration and the reality of religious persecution. Dissenters such as the Coltmans were effectively barred from serving in political office. Members of the Presbyterian Great Meeting, the Coltman family was also enmeshed in the volatile labour politics that characterised the early English Industrial Revolution. John Coltman, Elizabeth’s father and successful hosier, drew the ire of Leicester’s largely Anglican knitters when he was rumoured to have embraced mechanisation. Fearful of losing their jobs and resentful of Dissenters’ presence in Leicester, factory workers descended on the Coltman family house in 1787 and continued on a ten-day riot, a scene dramatically recounted by Robson as being peppered with slogans such as “No Presbyterians, no machines.”¹ And though Robson is careful not to ascribe Coltman’s faith alone to the motivations behind labourers anxious about their further class degradation, she convincingly argues that these formative experiences of religious tolerance and worker exploitation shaped Elizabeth’s early worldview.

Robson offers similar detail into gender norms of Elizabeth’s life, those to which she conformed and those which she unabashedly transgressed. In 1789, Elizabeth married John Heyrick, a lawyer and member of the English gentry. What was initially an amicable, even passionate match soon devolved into a marriage marked by melancholy brought on by John’s short temper and frequent absences necessitated by his army service. And though their marriage was troubled nearly from the start, Robson describes John’s death by a sudden heart attack as a “blow from which Elizabeth never recovered.”²

Robson ably transitions from Elizabeth’s disillusionment with her married life to a consideration of her deepening religious convictions. Quakerism not only appealed

¹ Jocelyn Robson, *Elizabeth Heyrick: The Making of Anti-Slavery Campaigner* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2024), p. 29.

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

to Elizabeth as a source of spiritual comfort after her husband's death in 1797, but it also definitively brought her into the reform work that would define the remainder of Elizabeth's adult life. Robson presents Heyrick's move towards anti-slavery work as an evolution, not a foregone conclusion. In the final pages of the fourth book section and all of the fifth, Robson shows how Heyrick's expanding circle of Quaker intimates brought her deeper into the fold of reform work. Beginning with her 1809 pamphlets against bull-baiting, Heyrick soon produced an outpouring of pamphlets on prison reform, wage inequality, and, soon, slavery.

By the 1820s, Elizabeth Heyrick's writing was nearly uniformly concerned with anti-slavery and providing compensation for those who had been enslaved. Heyrick's radicalism gets its full due in Robson's accounting of her writing campaigns. Her 1824 pamphlet *Immediate Not Gradual* not only railed against the gradualism championed by most white abolitionists (Quakers included) but it also insisted that the formerly enslaved receive reparations. Two ensuing pamphlets, also published in 1824, called for a boycott of sugar and specifically decried persistent racist abolitionist belief that Black people were inferior to white people, even if these self-styled radical reformers despised slavery. Such views went far afield of mainstream abolitionist and reformist sentiments, as Robson's thorough accounting of contemporary abolitionists readily attests to. Not only did her pamphlets set Heyrick apart, but so too did her work organizing with other women to lead abolitionist organizations. After attending the first independent women-led antislavery society in Birmingham, Heyrick established the affiliated Leicester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society with Susanna Watts in 1825. Not bound by the exclusivity of men's antislavery societies, the Leicester Ladies circulated abolitionist tracts, raised funds in support of national antislavery societies, and, crucially, raised the national consciousness about the particular plight of enslaved women. Elizabeth Heyrick did not live to see abolitionism legally codified in England. But the work she undertook during her lifetime provided a crucial voice in the chorus calling for justice.

In just 150 pages, Jocelyn Robson provides a compelling and comprehensive account of a woman whose work was foundational for moving the needle on the English antislavery movement. An anonymous author in her own time, Elizabeth Heyrick did not court fame. After she died, her family members' inexplicable razing of her personal letters compounded the difficulties of precisely locating Heyrick's place in the history of English abolitionism. Luckily for readers interested in histories of moral reform, abolitionism, Quakerism, and early modern women alike, *Elizabeth Heyrick: The Making of an Early Anti-Slavery Campaigner* puts the disparate pieces of Heyrick's life together and places her firmly in the light.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

