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Kimberly A. LoPrete, *Adela of Blois, Countess and Lord (c. 1067-1137)*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007. xxv + 663 pp. Maps, family trees, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-85182-563-0.

Review by Constance B. Bouchard, University of Akron.

Georges Duby considered twelfth-century women not just marginal but silent. In the last decade or so a number of historians have reacted strongly against this characterization.^[1] Here Kimberly LoPrete gives a biography of Adela of Blois, daughter of William the Conqueror and countess of Blois, whose life and activities belie the notion that women could not wield real power. The sheer bulk of this book is also an indication that such women were far from silent.

This book is based on an enormous amount of research in both printed and manuscript sources. Dr. LoPrete found evidence for Adela's activities in manuscripts in eleven libraries and archives in three countries. She follows Adela's seventy-year life essentially year-by-year. In an appendix she lists chronologically all the documents and chronicles in which Adela appears, with brief summaries and often short quotes. She also includes a good deal of the history of the family of Adela's husband, the Thibaudians (as she calls the lineage, because Thibaud was the most common name given to heirs). The result is a book that LoPrete herself calls a "dense and seemingly sprawling monograph" (p. xix).

LoPrete states that her principal arguments are that Adela and the Thibaudians were more interested in consolidating power across multiple counties than in abstract constitutional issues, and that they were more worried about the ambitions of the counts of Anjou than about the Capetian kings, with whom they have often been seen as competing (p. 18). She is also determined to date events in Adela's life more accurately than has been done in the past and to provide information from previously overlooked (usually because unpublished) sources. While this sort of detail will be very useful to future scholars who study the Thibaudians or who come across Adela in their own research, such a narrow focus also may distract from the work's potential broad implications.

The book is intended unabashedly as a biography—or at least an account of Adela's "life and times"—rather than an effort to use Adela as a window into the role played by aristocratic women of the high Middle Ages or of the ways that French counties were governed under the Capetians. LoPrete in fact explicitly rejects any such approaches in her introduction (pp. 1-2), though she relents by the book's end and focuses her whole conclusion on female lordship. She is fully aware of the impossibility of writing a biography such as one would expect of a twentieth-century figure, given the lack of sources like diaries or personal letters that might convey the subject's inner thoughts and feelings, but the book stays determinedly focused on Adela throughout. LoPrete's Adela is consistently independent and feisty, traits that the author clearly admires.

In spite of her protestations, LoPrete has a much broader purpose than straightening out the details of Adela's life and of the Thibaudians' political agenda. A point to which she returns repeatedly, and which will be the primary long-term value of the book, is that aristocratic women in twelfth-century France were not the marginalized, subjugated beings that Duby and too many others assumed. LoPrete is, however, far from the first scholar to make this point. Perhaps because the fifteen years that it took to

bring a book of this complexity to fruition correspond to the fifteen years in which women's historians have turned against Duby's formulation of the silent female, the harshness of some of LoPrete's sweeping criticism of other scholars seems unjustified (for example, p. 90, "...historians' seeming inability to accept that women represented in charters as co-dispositors with their husbands...were at some level perceived to be acting as their husband's...equals should be seen as modern analysts' misguided concern to discern legal or juridical distinctions where none existed...").

After an introduction focusing primarily on the nature of the sources, LoPrete begins with Adela's birth, which she redates. Adela was the youngest daughter of William I, born within a year or two after his conquest of England--and hence more "royal" than her older sisters, born when he was still only a duke--and named for her maternal grandmother, herself a Capetian princess. Adela was married to Stephen-Henry, the count of Blois-Chartres, in the 1080s; LoPrete argues that this marriage has been misdated by earlier scholars. Adela acted as regent for her husband's territories when he left on the First Crusade, and then continued as regent for her sons when he died in 1102. She thus acted as lord of a great swath of territory stretching from the borders of Lorraine in the east almost to the borders of Normandy in the west. She retired to Marcigny, Cluny's daughter-house for nuns, after administering the Thibaudian counties for some twenty years, and was remembered as the mother of a king--Stephen of England (1135-54)--and the ancestor of the counts of Champagne.

Adela serves as a lucid example of many aspects of the lives of aristocratic women in the twelfth century. She was entirely literate in Latin and was even praised for the fine Latin verses she composed, which talent was considered unusual but not bizarre in an age where upper-class women were expected to be educated. Because her birth family, that of the kings of England, was more powerful than the family into which she married, she was given more deference than might be expected in a patriarchal era, and her first son and first daughter were named for her parents. She routinely appeared with her husband in his charters while he was alive, ratifying his actions, and sometimes took the lead in donations or legal cases. Both Adela and her husband made frequent and judicious grants to religious houses, which helped promote ecclesiastical reform. Adela negotiated with church leaders not only on her own behalf but also on behalf of her relatives, as when she was able to free her brother, Henry I of England, from threatened excommunication. When laymen and ecclesiastics quarreled with each other, she sometimes acted as a judge both sides could trust, even though she herself quarreled with the canons of Chartres and Bishop Ivo. This active public figure was also a mother, bearing five sons and at least one daughter, for all of whom she arranged marriages or ecclesiastical careers.

An interesting point that emerges from LoPrete's evidence, although she does not make much of it, is that the families at the center of her analysis show no sign of the primogeniture that is usually assumed to have been well established by the year 1100. That is, the eldest sons could not assume that they would inherit everything, leaving their brothers to fend for themselves. Rather, inheritance was arranged somewhat differently in every family. Among Adela's own brothers, the sons of William the Conqueror, Robert, the oldest, inherited Normandy but not England, which went to the second surviving son, William Rufus. Adela's husband, Stephen-Henry, had a younger half-brother, and they divided their father's counties. Adela's own oldest son, William, did not take over any of the Thibaudian lands. Instead, he became lord of Sully after his father's death--his father had acquired Sully from its last lord--and then married the daughter of that last lord of Sully to cement his position (a marriage Adela doubtless arranged). He left Thibaudian possessions to be administered by Adela for the next fifteen years and eventually to be taken by his younger brothers. LoPrete demonstrates convincingly that one cannot believe the chroniclers of a century later, who claimed that William was excluded from Thibaudian inheritance because of some physical or mental defect. But one wishes she had not stopped at arguing that these chroniclers were wrong. It would have been worth discussing the development, by the beginning of the thirteenth century, of the belief that the oldest son *ought* to inherit, and that some explanation had to be created for earlier cases where that had not happened.

In addition, the book suggests that political history can be much more interesting if one does not always start with the kings. LoPrete does not really make this point explicit, but her many accounts of political maneuvering make the French king just one more player, not the center of the story. That is, rather than asking whether the king was strong or weak, or looking forward to the creation of the powerful monarchy of the early modern period, LoPrete demonstrates that the king was someone with whom other great lords could negotiate or against whom they would fight, looking for their own advantage rather than trying to create a “state.”

In this era of shrinking scholarly books, it is refreshing to see a volume in which everything that one might want to know about Adela is available in one place—and the footnotes, which often provide something of a miniature historiographic essay on a topic, are appropriately at the bottom of the page. The family trees are very helpful in following all the men and women mentioned in the text; the maps provide a context for Adela’s broad-ranging activities; and the index is unusually full, including identifications of people and places as well as giving the pages on which they will be found. LoPrete writes clearly and without jargon, even if one might critique the length of some of her sentences.

And yet the book will probably prove intimidating to someone who is not already interested in the Loire valley at the beginning of the twelfth century. The sheer amount of detail can threaten to overwhelm the book’s broader themes. Given that LoPrete has previously published extensively on Adela, she has already made many of her major points, even if not in the detail provided here—in fact she invites the reader (p. xix) to start with the articles rather than plunging straight in. The book is much too big to assign in a graduate seminar. Nonetheless it belongs on the shelves of all scholarly libraries and of all historians working on the social history of high medieval France. It may be cited more often than it is actually read, but the broader points (even the ones LoPrete denies she is making) are well worth following in the company of someone as intriguing as Adela.

NOTE

[1] See, most notably, Theodore Evergates, ed., *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); and Fredric L. Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

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