

Carving Out a Space for Female Achievement in Early Modern England: the Life of Lady Elizabeth Russell

Introduction:

Lady Elizabeth Cooke Hoby Russell was an early modern English noblewoman who was able to be influential in government policy and social movements in a way that many other women of the time were not. Elizabeth was able to wield more influence in her community than most women of her time for two main reasons: she was well-educated and she had powerful family connection with the elite of English society. With these advantages at her disposal, Elizabeth was able to follow the example of her namesake the Queen to effect change in the political arena, the religious arena, and her own life.

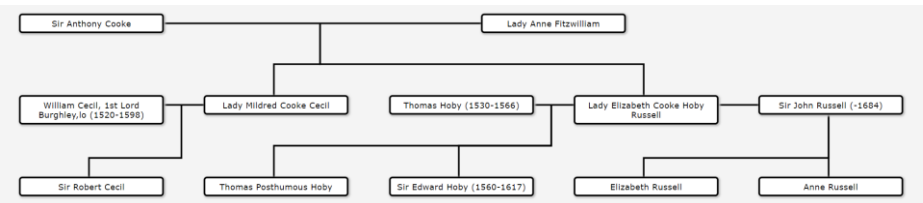
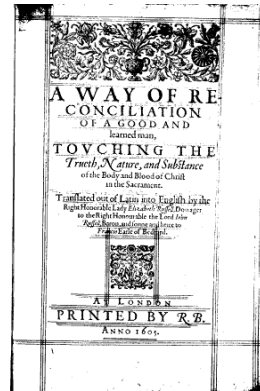
Unique Expressions of Power:

Because officially sanctioned outlets were not as readily available for Elizabeth, she found unique ways to express herself. One of these was in tomb design. When her husband and two daughters died in close proximity to one another, Elizabeth composed an epitaph for their joint grave. Thanks to her classical education, Elizabeth was also able to translate Christian texts from Latin to English. At least one of her translations survives as a published book. (pictured) By printing this particular book, entitled, *A Way of Reconciliation of a Good and Learned Man, Touching the Truth Nature, and Substance of Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament*, Lady Russell not only established herself as a woman with an educated and sophisticated mind but as one with the heart of a “hot” Protestant.

Elizabeth also insisted on social recognition that she believed she deserved. In Early Modern England, titles of nobility were distributed and maintained by the College of the Arms, as they still are today. This means that any dynastic changes in noble titles must be approved by the College. Near the end of his life, Lord Russell’s relative occupying the position of Count Bedford had died, leaving Lord Russell as the nearest male inheritor. However, with Lord Russell’s sudden death, the proceedings for his promotion were interrupted. Lady Russell, not content to be simply a lady for the rest of her life, insisted on being granted the title Dowager Countess despite the fact that her husband had never been a Count. There is some uncertainty as to whether or not this ever actually happened, but in her mind it was a done deal: she referred to herself as Dowager Countess for the rest of her life.

An Educational Marvel:

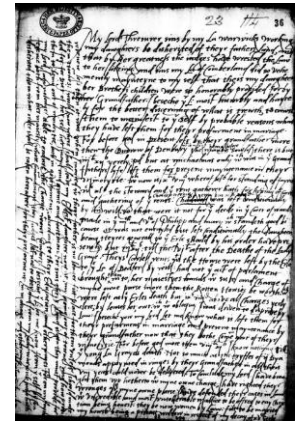
Unlike most women of the Early Modern Period, even wealthy ones, Elizabeth’s father made the education of his daughters a top priority. Anthony Cooke is perhaps best known as tutor to the young Prince Edward, and he certainly used the skills that he had learned as a private tutor to hire the best and brightest to educate his young daughters. In the early modern period, higher-class education generally consisted of one or more private tutors who would often live near or with the family. The focus of education would have been based on humanist ideals, so Greek and Latin would be taught as well as history and other more common subjects such as mathematics. Most of the education would be based on readings assigned to the students. Elizabeth and her sisters, Anne and Mildred, were thus educated classically: as a contemporary of their family wrote that Anthony was, “a man happy in his Daughters, whom having brought up in Learning, both Greek and Latine (sic), above their Sex, he married to men of good Account.” The historian Marjorie McIntosh has described the situation as a Cooke University for females. Elizabeth continued her own education for the rest of her life, partly by making friends with a large variety of the educated, like printers. She also raised her own children with a similar education, continuing the tradition of a Cooke University.



Correspondence with the Powerful:

Lady Russell was well-known among the highest levels of London Society at the end of the 16th century: at the death of her first husband, Thomas Hoby, even Queen Elizabeth I sent condolences in which she praised the Lady’s bravery and stamina in restoring Thomas’ body to English soil from his post as French ambassador.

Since she was related to the Cecil’s by marriage, Elizabeth constantly had a connection to the Queen and her retinue. William Cecil, Lord Burghley, was arguably the Queen’s favorite bureaucrat. His son Robert inherited those powerful connections when he took over. It is also thanks to the Lord(s) Burghley that so much of her correspondence was preserved, because they kept all of the writing that they could and modern scholars of the duo have digitized most of it for the Cecil Papers Project.



A letter from E. Russell to W. Cecil

Family Ties:

Dr. Chris Laoutaris points out in his book, *Shakespeare and the Countess*, that Elizabeth Cooke was descended from a long line of women who took individual power where they could get it. She was also raised with the knowledge that she came from a high-born family with some amount of power in their social circles, and she apparently took that to heart. The effect that these invisible factors had on her personality cannot be ignored, but there are even more concrete reasons why her family connections were valuable sources of influence for her.

In the Early Modern period, social and political relationships were defined by patronage, a system which was woven through all social classes and groups. Although it was mainly a theoretical relationship by the 16th century, its power was no less tangible. Family relationships automatically implied a sense of patronage, especially when it came to marriage. In the case of Lady Russell, her sister Mildred was married to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, which was discussed above. Additionally, her status as daughter and student of Anthony Cooke was an important factor in her intellectual career because he had been a well-respected intellectual of the previous generation. Both of her husbands had been up-and-coming political figures when they suddenly died, Thomas Hoby as an ambassador (and potential spy) in France and John Russell as a cousin and potential heir for the Count of Bedford. Elizabeth’s role in their careers did not go unnoticed: when Hoby was an ambassador to France, she spent much of her time engaging with Catherine Medici, the Queen Mother at the time, and when she was expecting a daughter with John Russell, he wrote to William Cecil expressing his concern about losing his wife for both practical and emotional reasons. After their deaths, she continued to draw on her connections to them as sources for validation and support.

Conclusion:

Lady Russell’s inimitable personality was amplified by her social connections and her education to create a powerhouse female figure capable of organizing mass protests against the Globe Theatre, translating and commenting on religious treatises, and enacting smaller but significant changes in her community. She owned several properties in her own right, a unique feat for the time period, and demanded a level of respect towards herself and her family which was generally respected. Although the two main sources of her influence may be discerned, her own drive and determination cannot be discounted and she deserves all the credit for recognizing and making the most out of those advantages.