

*Orphans, Widows and Guardians in Medieval and Early Modern Bristol: the Register of Recognizances, 1333-1594*. Susan Scott, ed. Bristol Record Society, 2020. xii, 405 pp, seven ill. Hardback £25.00 [ISBN 978-0-901538-42-0].

Only Bristol and London have surviving evidence about provision for orphans in the medieval period (and beyond) which makes the publication of this book extremely important. It opens up the study of women, men and children of the Bristol elite (freemen families) to those who might not tackle the manuscript material which is in a mixture of Latin, French and English. The guardians of orphans from burgess families were obliged to attend the mayor's court to record their legal obligation, in a recognizance, to hand over the property which had been bequeathed to the orphan or orphans in their care once they reached their majority or in the case of girls, their marriage. When a burgess died, his children were considered to be orphans even if his wife, the children's mother, was alive, and thus it was often she who attended court.

The first recognizance is dated 1333 and refers to a charter of Edward III of 1331 which was granted to the city in response to a practical problem of the Bristol elite: some of the guardians of orphans were failing to return their inheritances to them when they reached their majority or marriage, and were escaping justice by leaving town. Edward's charter confirmed the right and responsibility of the mayor to oversee - in his court - the care and return of the orphans' lands, tenements, property and chattels from their guardians, and the two guarantors who stood surety for the value of these for each orphan. In a typical urban mayoral court the recognizances were recorded in a register, with this publication covering the first of Bristol's two registers. The editor has supplemented the recognizances with material from notes linked to some of the recognizances (for example marginal annotations) and by reference to many post-1385 wills, probate and burial records and indeed photographs of effigies on tombs. Bristol also had a volume, much better known than the Register, entitled the Great Orphan Book and Book of Wills 1380-1674, from which extracts by T. P. Wadley were published in 1886 by the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society. These extracts have been used, along with some original wills, to provide supplementary material for 88% of the recognizances.

The recognizances and supplementary material are summarized in the order of the Register's folios but made easy for the reader by collecting together all the references to the same individual and family, who also appear in the Index of People (nearly 200 families). The material in the summary is given in this format: folio number(s), dates of the recognizance(s), names of the orphans, their ages if given, their father and his occupation; name and status of the guardian (often the widow and mother), the orphan's or orphans' inheritance; the names and occupations of the guarantors, the amounts of their sureties and a standard condition that they were to be replaced within a month, if they died, decayed or withdrew from the city.

The recognizances essentially rehearsed what the father had bequeathed to his child or children. The significance of this publication is two-fold: all the material relating to one burgess and his children is drawn together, and is translated, transcribed and presented in an ordered and indexed form, with marginal notes and strikings-out, etc, given where relevant. These often deal with the discharge of recognizances where what was due was paid to the orphans at the appropriate time, or to necessary changes due to remarriages or deaths in the family; to give one example, a husband's testamentary instruction might be repeated in the recognizance that an elder son was to allow his father's widow (the orphan son's mother or stepmother) 'peaceably to enjoye the howse wherein she nowe dwellith', as might the requirement that the widow should provide meat, drink, apparel and lodging for both the burgess's sons and see them well educated and brought up. Anyone who has worked through the repetitive and often poorly written, altered and updated records of later medieval or early modern urban mayoral courts will appreciate the format of this book.

There is a very full introduction to the material in which the editor's analysis includes the age and sex of the orphans, allowing her to comment on family size and child mortality, subjects always of interest to medievalist and early modernist. More unusually, because of the material, she is able to investigate the wealth of the orphans, the upbringing and age at marriage of girls and the upbringing and apprenticeships of boys, and to a limited extent the education of both. One of the recognizances was marked by two adult sisters in 1603, and the scribe also signed and wrote the sisters' names underneath what were indeed rather crude marks (figure 3). The use of marks might indicate, as the editor notes, that these women were not in the habit of writing (not legal documents, at least).

It was typical in the sixteenth-century Bristol recognizances which like wills were more numerous and wordy than the earlier ones, that guardians and guarantors agreed to ensure that orphans were both provided with food and clothing according to their degree and gender and also well educated and instructed; however one or two at least have more specific instructions such as education in 'honest sciences and exercises' which might bear further research.

The detail in the recognizances and the editor's expert and extensive study has allowed her to both tabulate and discuss subjects such as the occupations of the orphans' benefactors; the value of legacies where given in the recognizances; the growing prominence of merchants as benefactors in sixteenth century; the civic status of the fathers and grandfathers of the orphans; the occupations of the guarantors between 1545 and 1594, the ages at betrothal of the orphan girls for a longer period, between 1341 and 1588, and much more. A great deal of material is helpfully tabulated in the tables in the Appendix as well as the Summary of Entries itself. As well as the index of personal names, there are indices of subjects and place-names within Bristol (largely streets and churches) and places outside the city. These would enable the reader or researcher to consider further the topography of Bristol, which could be examined further by looking at the recognizances which specified, for example, shops and gardens as part of the property an orphan was to receive.

The editor provides readers and researchers with a mass of detail not only about the care of wealthy orphans but also about other Bristol people, and the topography of Bristol and its hinterland, when Bristol was at the height of its prosperity in the later fourteenth century. The city prospered as it took over the trade of the Cinque Ports of south-east England and had yet to experience the growing competition which would soon come from London. Bristol prospered despite, or perhaps because of, the high rate of deaths from plague, which is shown in the Register by the large number of deaths of orphans' fathers in the Black Death. The editor tabulates these deaths and also surveys the spikes in deaths in the sixteenth century, many from plague, especially in 1575-76.

There are a number of illustrations in the form of photographs of folios from the Register. These show its covers, a copy of Edward III's 1331 charter and an early (1404) and later (1578) recognizance. The latter two are captioned as examples of formats of different period but have been reproduced only as half-pages; full-page reproduction would have made them easier to read and so more useful, as indeed a map would have been. However these are minor quibbles given the wealth of material here which will make it an invaluable and accessible source for local, regional and family historians, as well as students and scholars. Such subjects as occupations, trades, the education of boys and girls and civic governance could be explored, taking into account change over time. Indeed the editor herself touches on developments in the urban government in relation to orphans in the introduction, pointing for example to the new role for Bristol's Chamberlain in the sixteenth century. This publication is 'essentially an expansion of the editor's MA dissertation at the university of Bristol'. The introduction, analysis, summary of entries, tabulated content, lists of books and articles consulted and very helpful bibliography make it a very substantial work, and a starting point for others' research, on which the editor is to be congratulated.

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