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Review of Laura Pachtner, *Lady Charlotte Blennerhassett (1843–1917):  
Katholisch, kosmopolitisch, kämpferisch*  
by Johanna Gehmacher

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LAURA PACHTNER, *Lady Charlotte Blennerhassett (1843–1917): Katholisch, kosmopolitisch, kämpferisch*, Schriftenreihe der Historischen Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 104 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 720 pp. ISBN 978 3 525 31097 7. €90.00

In the early twenty-first century, Lady Charlotte Blennerhassett is known only to a few. Experts in reform Catholicism may have come across her correspondence with church historian Ignaz Döllinger, while historians of French–German relations will possibly know about her comprehensive biography of Madame de Staël. But in other scholarly circles—not to mention the broader public—her name is largely forgotten. However, when she died in Munich during the First World War, this German who took British nationality was not only mourned as the ‘last European’, but also well-known as a highly regarded writer of European cultural and political history. German historian Laura Pachtner has now published a comprehensive, diligently researched biography of this remarkable woman.

Charlotte Blennerhassett, born to a Bavarian noble family in 1843, is, indeed, a fascinating personality. Her life and career elucidate both the limited scope for personal development faced by noble young women in mid nineteenth-century Germany, and the agency and influence an outstanding personage like her could achieve even in this traditional milieu. Countess Charlotte von Leyden—from 1870 onwards Lady Blennerhassett—was a well-informed and strong-minded correspondent with links to Catholic intellectuals all over Europe. She published numerous historical books and essays that were highly acclaimed in her time. The mother of three lived a transnational life between London, Paris, and Munich. For many years, she was at the centre of the fierce conflicts between ‘liberal’ and ‘ultramontane’ (papist) factions of Catholicism over the position of the Church in rapidly modernizing societies. As a committed advocate of freedom of science and the separation of state and church, Blennerhassett always tried to mediate between the parties and warned against irreconcilable positions. After the conservatives prevailed at the First Vatican Council (1869–70), she was forced to hold back criticism that risked the schism of the Church.

Charlotte von Leyden's family of origin exemplified the transformations of the German nobility in a rapidly industrializing society in several respects. Charlotte's mother Franziska von Leyden, a devout Catholic from the von Weling family (previously a Jewish bankers' family that went by the surname Seligmann until their conversion and ennoblement), committed Charlotte to a traditional female upbringing which included an extended stay at a conservative Catholic boarding school frequented by the offspring of noble families. A ban on any scientific learning after her return home was meant to prevent her from spoiling her marriage opportunities. While the family strove to find a suitable husband for Charlotte (which proved difficult due to a rather small dowry), the intellectually active young woman eager for education was denied even the smallest personal freedoms. Only her acquaintance with Ignaz Döllinger, provost of the cathedral in Munich and an acclaimed liberal theologian more than forty years her senior, allowed her some intellectual and personal space. Döllinger provided her with scholarly books and, as his pupil, she was soon excellently informed about the controversies over the modernization of the church. When her family finally allowed her to travel to Paris and Rome, she was therefore able to send Döllinger detailed reports on the public and private opinions of the different parties abroad. Through him, she came into contact with many liberal Catholic thinkers of her time. Among them were the British historian and essayist Lord Dalberg-Acton and the French bishop Félix Dupanloup – both critics of the dogmatization of papal infallibility who nonetheless remained in the Church after its announcement by the First Vatican Council in 1870. Döllinger, by contrast, continued his harsh public criticism and was soon excommunicated. Marrying Charlotte von Leyden to the Anglo-Irish Catholic baronet and liberal politician Sir Rowland Blennerhassett, whom his protégée had met in Rome, was one of his last acts as a priest.

Through her marriage, Charlotte Blennerhassett escaped the strict surveillance of her family. But their economic difficulties followed her. Her husband's estate in Kerry was already in debt, and with the rise of the Irish Home Rule movement, his chances of obtaining revenue from the land diminished even further. Soon, the young couple could not afford their own house in London anymore. Charlotte and the

children spent more and more time in France and Bavaria, where living costs were lower. Increasingly, Blennerhassett, who had already published her first article (a report on liberal Catholicism in France) before her marriage, made her interests and profound knowledge of European history profitable as a prolific writer of scholarly articles, essays, and books, many of them on French history. Nonetheless, she would not have been able to provide her children Arthur, Marie Carola, and Willy with an education befitting their noble status without the help of her mother and her brother Casimir.

The recognition Blennerhassett received for her scholarly work was extraordinary. Her historical works – including extensive studies of culture and politics in eighteenth and nineteenth-century France, several publications on British history (such as a series of articles on Victorian England published in 1913–14), and biographies and biographical essays on both historical figures and contemporaries – were received very positively and often reviewed in highly respected journals. While she published several biographical portraits (including of Mary Stuart, Joan of Arc, and Marie Antoinette) that could be seen as part of the literature on women worthies, she also wrote on politicians and writers like Talleyrand and Chateaubriand. In the renowned German *Historische Zeitschrift*, where reviews of works by non-academic – let alone female – authors were scarce, Blennerhassett's three-volume biography of the famous salonnière and writer of Revolutionary France, Germaine de Staël, was highly praised for 'understanding the interplay between political events, the ideologies of the time, and Madame de Staël's life and works' (p. 400; all translations by Johanna Gehmacher). In 1898, at a time when German women were still fighting for access to universities, the University of Munich awarded Blennerhassett an honorary doctorate. Her nomination for this honour was based on her 'sharp judgement and masculine force of spirit' (p. 454), while a couple of years earlier her admission to the Bavarian Academy of Sciences had failed because of her sex (p. 452). France, by contrast, thanked her for promoting cultural understanding between Germany and France by admitting her to the 'Ordre des Palmes Académiques' founded by Napoleon in 1808 (p. 456).

As a member of a transnational aristocratic family and a Catholic intellectual with correspondents all over Europe, Blennerhassett bore

witness to the First World War in the last years of her life. Although her husband had died in 1909, she refused to apply for the reinstatement of her German nationality. In 1917, Charlotte Blennerhassett passed away as an enemy alien in Germany and never had the chance to rejoin her surviving friends abroad or her children living in the UK and overseas.

The extraordinary protagonist of this comprehensive biography is worthy of discussion for several reasons. First of all, it is noticeable that the study was published by the Historical Commission of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences—a fact that might be considered a late compensation for the failure to admit Blennerhassett to this prestigious institution. The significant role played by Blennerhassett and other aristocratic Catholic women as mediators and opinion formers in the debates and transnational political conflicts over the role of church and religion in secular societies sheds new light on the cultural and intellectual history of European Catholicism. It also raises questions about the gendered character of practices of intermediation in the heavily male-dominated institutions of the Catholic Church.

Second, this biography of a mid nineteenth-century female intellectual is also fascinating from a broader gender perspective. Blennerhassett herself once noted her generational position between two eras. The early nineteenth century was still influenced by the Enlightenment and by revolutions, which had raised women's hopes of emancipation at the end of the century in many countries, while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, growing women's movements brought forward demands for educational and political rights for women. Between these more turbulent eras, however, restrictive ideologies regarding women's 'proper place' made it extremely difficult for a woman to obtain a higher education or take a public role as an intellectual. A closer look at journals of the time nonetheless reveals many female authors who often wrote under pseudonyms. In most cases, it is not easy to find out how these women, who were excluded from formal academic education and access to archives, acquired their knowledge. Blennerhassett is a good case in point for the alternative, often rather efficient informal networking strategies many of them used. Her example is therefore constructive in analysing the gendered history of knowledge and the informal

scholarly practices of a period that still deserve far more attention. The ways in which Charlotte Blennerhassett legitimized her extraordinary career are also instructive for the analysis of later debates on women's education. Although she had fought hard for her own education against the conservative views of her mother, she was far from demanding equal education for all women. On the contrary, she based her claim to be respected as a historian solely on her exceptional talent. This argumentative strategy provides historical context for elitist concepts of female intellectuality that were to turn up again in both feminist and anti-feminist arguments at the turn of the century.

Third, Laura Pachtner's work on Blennerhassett highlights some interesting questions from the perspective of transnational biography. It illustrates the challenges of all transnational biographical projects that must take into account archives in several countries and often require reading knowledge of more than one language. In the case of a member of the European elite connected with many eminent scholars, access to archives is comparatively straightforward (leaving aside the enormous amount of material Pachtner obviously had to deal with). In other cases, however, the distribution of archival material over multiple countries can make such a project unfeasible. Apart from these methodological issues, the case of Blennerhassett also opens up new perspectives on national, transnational, and global biographies of the nineteenth century. Biographical research often focuses on biography as a specific narrative closely linked with nationalism (best exemplified in national biographical encyclopaedias that nationalize individual lives despite all their complexities). Nations are also often taken for granted, with those moving between them (such as migrants, missionaries, adventurers, and refugees) seen as the exceptions to the national norm. However, when global religious communities such as the Catholic Church or transnational elites like the European nobility become the background for a European history of the nineteenth century, national identities become less self-evident and transnational lives a more common phenomenon worthy of detailed study.

For her book, Laura Pachtner has conducted extensive archival work in several countries and has documented her findings meticulously. Presenting Blennerhassett's life over more than 700 pages, she has undoubtedly surpassed earlier, more fragmentary research on this

eminent Anglo-German female writer and historian. However, it is not easy to pin down her specific perspective on the protagonist. She formulates several questions, including about the loss of status of the nobility as a background for Blennerhasset's childhood experiences, or about how she developed her transnational networks, but it is not clear how she links her research with recent arguments from any specific research field or with a specific theoretical approach. Pachtner's reflections on biographical concepts also remain rather implicit. She introduces the concepts of micro-milieus, transnationalism, and networks in the opening section of her book. However, in the detailed narrative of Blennerhasset's life (the first half of the book) and of her work and politics (the second half of the book), it is hard to see how she used these concepts or if she came to any conclusions about their utility. Throughout the book, she remains rather reserved about her own perspectives – and even when she seems to have an opinion, she hesitates to tell us. For instance, at one point Pachtner discusses different (gendered) approaches to history writing in English and German contexts and quotes from historian Bonnie Smith's claim that (female) 'high amateurism' formed 'the intellectual avant-garde of a general historical project to reach the past' (p. 463); yet she concludes that the validity of this argument must remain a 'matter of opinion'. As a result, the overall impression of this ambitious book remains ambivalent. It provides an enormous wealth of detailed information and will therefore doubtlessly become an essential work of reference for all future researchers working on this enormously interesting historical personality. Furthermore, a careful reading of Pachtner's study will open up several new research questions, including on the intellectual history of European women of the nineteenth century, on transnational lives in aristocratic milieus, and on the gender history of Catholicism. However, this highly recommendable book would have been far easier to read if the author had avoided some redundancies and had found a bolder structure for her narrative.

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