The Cooke sisters

Education, piety and politics in early modern England



GEMMA ALLEN

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Abbreviations

Apologie J. Jewel, An Apologie or answere in defence of the Churche of Englande,

trans. Anne Bacon (1564). STC 14591.

Ascham Letters R. Ascham, Letters of Roger Ascham, trans. M. Hatch and A. Vos,

ed. A. Vos (New York, 1989).

Ballard G. Ballard, Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain, ed. R. Perry

(Detroit, 1985).

BL British Library, London.

BN Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Bodl. Bodleian Library, Oxford.

CP Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, Cecil Papers.

CS Camden Society.

CSP, Foreign Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the reign of Elizabeth I,

1558-1603, ed. J. Stevenson (23 vols, 1863-1950).

CSP, Spain Calendar of Letters and State Papers relating to English affairs

preserved principally in the Archives of Simancas, 1558-1603, ed.

M.A.S. Hume (4 vols, 1892-99).

CUL Cambridge University Library, Cambridge.
Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC.

HALS Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertford.

Hatfield House, Hertfordshire.

Haynes S. Haynes, A Collection of State Papers ... left by William Cecil, Lord

Burghley (1740).

HJ Historical Journal.

JEH Journal of Ecclesiastical History.

LMA London Metropolitan Archives, London.

LPL Lambeth Palace Library, London.

NA National Archives, London.

NAL Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Nouvelles acquisitions latines.

ODNB A.R. Matthew (ed.), The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

(Oxford, 2004).

PAPS Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society.

Reconciliation A Way of Reconciliation of a good and learned man touching the

Trueth, Nature, and Substance of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament, trans. Elizabeth Cooke Hoby Russell (1605). STC

21456.

SP State Papers, National Archives, London.

Spedding J. Spedding (ed.), The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon, including

all his occasional works (7 vols, 1861-74), I.

Abbreviations

STC

A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475-1640, compiled by A.W. Pollard and G.W. Redgrave, revised and enlarged by W.A. Jackson, F.S. Ferguson and K.F. Pantzer (3 vols, 1986-91).

TRHS

Transactions of the Royal Historical Society.

Urwick

W. Urwick, Nonconformity in Herts. Being Lectures upon the Non-Conforming Worthies of St Albans and Memorials of Puritanism and Nonconformity in all the Parishes of the County of Hertford

Vives

J.L. Vives, Vives and the Renascence Education of Women, ed. F.

Watson (New York, 1912).

Wing

A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British America and of English Books Printed in Other Countries, 1641-1700, compiled by D. Wing (4 vols, New York, 1982-98).

Note on conventions

The original spelling of documents has been retained, but u/v and i/j have been modernised and abbreviations have been silently expanded. Punctuation has been modernised where necessary and insertions to the text of a manuscript have been noted by ^^. Conjectured reconstructions, in the case of damaged manuscripts, are shown in square brackets. Quotations are provided in the original language and, where necessary, a translation follows in parentheses, except when quoting from translated sources. Quotations from Scripture are from the Geneva Bible (1560). Dates are Old Style, except that the year has been taken to begin on 1 January. Publications with Greek and Latin titles are given only in the latter language, but all other titles are reproduced in their original languages. The place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.

The sisters are referred to throughout primarily by their first names to avoid confusion between natal and marital surnames.

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Introduction

 $\mathbf{D}^{ ext{uring}}$ the early years of her marriage, Mildred Cooke Cecil translated a sermon of St Basil the Great from its original Greek into English. She translated his belief that every man should use his particular gifts to further 'the chirche of the living god', because 'in this chirche, which is as a large house, be not onely vessels of all sortes, as of goolde, silver, woode & earthe, but also, all maner of craftes'. To Mildred, her classical education provided her with a craft, which she could use to further the evangelical faith through the act of translation. Yet her text must also be seen within the context of the patronage networks of Edwardian England. Mildred presented her work to Anne Seymour, the duchess of Somerset. Recently married to William Cecil, then an up-and-coming administrator, Mildred acknowledged herself as a client, a 'humble servant & dettor', to the duchess; Anne Stanhope Seymour, then married to Edward Seymour, Protector Somerset, was one of the most powerfully connected female patrons in the country. By the accession of Elizabeth I, everything had changed. Mildred, now the wife of the Queen's Principal Secretary, was herself an influential member of the political networks of Elizabethan England. However, the issues revealed through her work of translation, namely those of education, piety and politics, still dominated her life and would continue to do so. How these themes interacted and impacted upon the lives of Mildred and her sisters is the major focus of this book.

Mildred was the first child born in 1526 to Sir Anthony Cooke and his wife, Anne Fitzwilliam. She was followed by four brothers and four sisters: Anne was the next girl, born in 1528 or 1529, followed by Margaret (c.1533), Elizabeth (c.1540) and Katherine (c.1542). Their father never attended university and was largely self-taught; his greatest claim to posthumous reputation is that he provided both his sons and his daughters with a thorough humanist education, in both classical and modern languages. It has long been suggested that Anthony Cooke acted as a tutor to Edward VI, yet it is more probable that he was employed as a reader after the retirement of Richard Cox in 1550. There has also been a persistent belief that Anne assisted her father in tutoring the young king, but there is no contemporary evidence for this assertion. 4

Mildred was the first sister to marry, becoming the second wife of William Cecil in December 1545. Motherhood proved difficult to achieve and no children were born for the first nine years of the marriage; of her five children, only Anne and Robert survived to adulthood. Mildred was certainly involved

in the early education of her children, for her husband described her as a 'matchless mother' governing Robert Cecil's education as 'so zealous and excellent a tutor'. The marriage was a happy one; Cecil described his wife as 'dearest above all' on her monument in Westminster Abbey. Mildred's influence grew with her husband's rising status, first as Principal Secretary and later as Baron Burghley and Lord Treasurer. Mildred was particularly politically active in the 1560s and 1570s, although there is evidence of her continued role as an intermediary to her husband well into the last decade of her life. William and Mildred were married for forty-three years, until Mildred's death on 4 April 1589.

Mildred's marriage was influential in determining her sisters' matches, for in February 1553 Anne Cooke was married to Cecil's friend, Nicholas Bacon, as his second wife, after a proposal by Walter Haddon had been rejected.⁷ On the accession of Mary I, Anne was instrumental in securing pardons for her husband and her brother-in-law, William Cecil, through her service to the new Queen.8 The Bacons' fortunes rose with the accession of Elizabeth in 1558, as Nicholas Bacon was made a privy councillor and Lord Keeper of the Great Seal shortly after. A translator of sermons by the Italian evangelical Bernardino Ochino in her youth, Anne continued her scholarly pursuits after her marriage, as shown by her 1564 translation into English of John Jewel's Apologia Ecclesiae Anglicanae, a project endorsed by her husband's political circle. The marriage brought multiple pregnancies, but only two of Anne's children survived into adulthood, Anthony and Francis Bacon. John Walsall, the Bacons' household chaplain, praised the couple's care in 'demeaning your selves in the education of your children'; however, it is after Nicholas Bacon's death in 1579 that there is the most evidence of Anne's maternal influence, in the form of the vast body of surviving letters exchanged between Anne and her then adult son Anthony.9 During Anne's thirty-one year widowhood, her godly religious beliefs are also most clearly apparent, as she took on a more active role in advancing the 'right Reformation', both in Hertfordshire and beyond, before her death in August 1610.10

Elizabeth and Margaret were the next sisters to marry after Anne, in a joint ceremony on 27 June 1558. Elizabeth had been living with the Cecils in Wimbledon since her father left for Continental exile in 1554, and there she met her first husband, Thomas Hoby." His elder half-brother, Sir Philip Hoby, was a close friend of William Cecil's and the men were no doubt influential in arranging the match. The couple were well suited intellectually; Thomas Hoby published his translation from Italian of Castiglione's *The Courtyer* in 1561 and it is likely that Elizabeth undertook her translation from Latin of John Ponet's *Diallacticon* at a similar time, although it remained unpublished until 1605. Thomas Hoby was knighted in 1566 and sent as the Elizabethan ambassador to France, accompanied by his wife and their growing family. Thomas

Hoby's sudden death in Paris in July 1566 left a pregnant Elizabeth to organise transporting her children back to England, events which she immortalised in neo-classical funerary verse. Tragedy struck again in 1571, when her two daughters died of the sweating sickness, leaving Elizabeth with her two sons, Edward and Thomas Posthumous Hoby, the latter having been born after the death of his father. Rumours had circulated in 1569 that Cecil had arranged for Elizabeth to marry the imprisoned duke of Norfolk, Thomas Howard, following the Northern Rising, but in the end Elizabeth remained a widow until marrying John, Lord Russell, heir to the earldom of Bedford, in December 1574.¹³ After the birth of two daughters, Bess and Anne, a longed-for son and heir to the earldom, Francis, was born in 1579, but died the following year. Elizabeth was again widowed after Lord Russell's early death in 1584, and the following year she was plunged into an inheritance battle on behalf of her Russell daughters, which she again recorded in Latin and Greek commemorative verse. Elizabeth's legal claims for her daughters were eventually rejected in 1593, yet her efforts on their behalf did not cease.14 She was active in securing for them positions as Maids of Honour to the Queen and in arranging the marriage of her daughter Anne Russell to Henry Somerset, Lord Herbert, the eldest son of the earl of Worcester in 1600; Elizabeth had previously been instrumental in securing the marriage of her son Thomas Posthumous Hoby to Margaret Dakins Sidney in 1596. Elizabeth's political networks are also most apparent during her second widowhood, as she exchanged letters with Lord Burghley, Robert Cecil and the earl of Essex, as well as hosting the Queen at Bisham in 1592. As her political contacts declined at the start of the seventeenth century, Elizabeth became increasingly isolated, as demonstrated by her eventual defeat in 1606 in her legal battle over rights to Donnington Castle. Elizabeth died on 3 June 1609, survived by three of her seven children.

Less is known about the other Cooke sister who married alongside Elizabeth in June 1558. Margaret served Mary I at court and her father, though in exile, was concerned that she was still unwed in 1557. He wrote to his son-in-law Cecil in March, and it may have been through the latter's means that Margaret came to marry Sir Ralph Rowlett in June of the following year. Margaret died shortly after the wedding and she was buried on 3 August 1558.

The marriage of the youngest sister, Katherine, was the only match over which William Cecil exercised less initial influence. On Easter Day in April 1564, Cecil noted in his diary that 'H. Killigrew wrote to me an Invective for my misliking of his Mariadg with my Sister, Catharyn Cook'. His reasons for opposing the match are unknown, but they may have included Henry Killigrew's closeness to the earl of Leicester. Cecil's concerns, however, were not enough to stop the match and the couple married on 4 November 1565. Four daughters were born at intervals amongst Henry Killigrew's diplomatic missions to Scotland, Germany and France. There is little surviving evidence

regarding Katherine's activities during her marriage, bar her composition and receipt of a limited number of neo-Latin verses; her relationship with the godly preacher Edward Dering is revealed through his extant letters. Katherine predeceased her husband, on 27 December 1583.

The sisters have long received brief individual mention in the biographies of their male relatives. The manuscript 'Anonymous Life' of Burghley, written within five years of his death and possibly by his secretary Michael Hickes, described Mildred as a 'wise, & vertuous Gentlewoman ... excellently lerned'. ¹⁹ In the early seventeenth century, William Camden characterised the sisters primarily in terms of their father, Sir Anthony Cooke, 'whom having brought up in Learning, both Greek and Latine, above their Sex, he married [them] to men of good Account'. ²⁰ In the first biography of Anne's son Francis Bacon, published in 1657 by his chaplain, William Rawley, Anne was described as a 'choice lady, and eminent for piety, virtue and learning; being exquisitely skilled, for a woman, in the Greek and Latin tongues'. ²¹

Yet there is also a trend of scholarly disapproval of the sisters by those historians writing on their male relatives. Thomas Birch's 1754 Memoirs of the reign of Queen Elizabeth described Anne as having a peevish and severe temper, suggesting that such a temperament worked to make her less effective in advising her sons.²² James Spedding, writing in 1861 on Francis Bacon, characterised Anne as an admirable mother throughout her son's youth, yet was more critical of her behaviour by the 1590s; she was described as 'just beginning to fail ... in the power of self-command'.23 The twentieth century brought more overt disapproval, particularly of Mildred. Convers Read argued that while Burghley showed 'respect and admiration' for his wife, he 'wonders whether Burghley's conjugal relations lacked warmth'. 24 He added, unnecessarily surely, that 'If we may judge from her portrait, she lacked feminine charm'. Read even wrongly suggested that there was a silence in her political and religious activities from 1570 onwards: 'Burghley may have whispered in her ear that she was doing more harm than good'.25 Ian MacFarlane, in his study of the neo-Latin poet George Buchanan, wrote of Mildred that 'some have thought she confused scholarship and tedium', although he provided no evidence as to who these contemporary detractors might be.26 Other recent scholarship on the Cookes' husbands and sons has been less condemnatory of the sisters, yet still gives little consideration to the political and religious roles they played alongside their male relatives.27

The sisters have, however, received considerable attention in their own right. Early works presented them as exemplars for women to follow, in a tradition which Natalie Zemon Davis has termed that of the 'women worthies'. In the early eighteenth century, John Strype described Mildred as 'singularly excellent a woman', and all the sisters were presented in the same manner in their individual biographies in George Ballard's 1752 Memoirs of Several

Ladies ... Celebrated for their Writings.29 It is only in the last three decades that the sisters have received more thoughtful attention. Literary scholars have been predominant amongst the recent work on the sisters, primarily treating them individually rather than as a group. A variety of studies have considered different aspects of their writings in English, in particular focusing on their contribution to various different genres of writing.30 The sisters have been less well served by historians, with the exception of work on Mildred Cooke Cecil.31 Yet to date there has been no large-scale and systematic study on all four sisters that draws upon the full range of surviving evidence, across all of their own writings, including those in classical languages, as well as more traditional historical sources.32 It is only by uncovering and analysing a more comprehensive source-base for all the sisters that we can ask - and answer - key questions about the nature and utility of the Cooke sisters' humanist education, about the extent of their religious and political agency and about its relationship to their unusual degree of learning. In order to address these questions, the book that follows draws on the entire extant body of the Cooke sisters' correspondence. Their letters exist in remarkable numbers for the period.33 Of those letters written by the sisters themselves, Anne's and Elizabeth's survive in the greatest numbers. Over a hundred letters written by Anne are still extant within the papers of her son Anthony Bacon, held at Lambeth Palace Library; the majority of Anne's letters therefore date from after Anthony's return to England in 1592. Over sixty of the letters penned by Elizabeth also still exist, dating from 1566 through to 1608, and the majority of this correspondence survives in the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House. Detailed analysis of this correspondence informs this study, which also draws on further important and previously untapped letters in a variety of other archives.³⁴ In comparison to that of her sisters, the absence of Mildred's correspondence is striking and unexplained; certainly we know that she received many letters which are no longer extant.35 Only five letters composed by Mildred survive, including the dedicatory epistle appended to her translation of St Basil the Great. Two further letters are in Greek and an additional letter in Latin is in another's hand.36 The fifth has previously been known only in printed form, however, I have discovered the existence of Mildred's original letter, written in her own handwriting.³⁷ This has importantly allowed the authenticity of her hand to be established for the first time, revealing her translation of St Basil to be in her own handwriting.³⁸ This discovery also has implications for the identification of her marginalia within the extant volumes from her library. There is a greater survival of letters written to Mildred, with a significant cluster dating from the Anglo-Scottish negotiations of 1560; I have also discovered previously unknown letters written to Mildred from Ireland in 1568.39 Only one letter still survives in the hand of Katherine Cooke Killigrew.40 However, four letters written to Katherine by the evangelical preacher Edward