The stories of five noblewomen who lived during turbulent years of the Scottish Middle Ages form the five chapters of this book. The first Euphemia was a lady of Duffus; the second the wife of the earl of Ross; the third a queen of Scotland; the fourth a countess of Ross and wife of the infamous Wolf of Badenoch; and the fifth a countess who resigned her earldom and became a nun. Elizabeth Sutherland is interested not only in the public roles and functions of these women, but also in their private lives and thoughts. The clear, evocative style of writing in Five Euphemias, its narrative approach, and its engaging use of anecdote all contribute to the book’s accessibility to general readers, and since medieval Scottish women have been largely neglected by professional and popular historians alike, it is exciting to see a book which places their experiences and perspectives firmly in the centre of its concerns.

The subject matter, the surroundings and inner lives of individual medieval women, is challenging. As the author says, “women feature hardly at all in the charts and records of that period” (11). Her picture is painted perhaps a bit too bleakly, for historians are finding that women are present in the historical record if only they know how to look for them. Looking for specific women, however, is of course a more difficult task than looking for women in general. When faced with a lack of sources dealing directly with the individual women under her consideration, Sutherland employs several strategies to varying degrees of
success. It works well when she uses contemporary evidence to illuminate what the lives of these women may have been like. For her description of how the garden of one of the Euphemiases might have looked in the fourteenth century, Sutherland draws on medieval encyclopedias, art, and monastic records (152-155). As she describes another Euphemia’s first arrival in her new town, Sutherland quotes the medieval Scottish Laws of the Four Burghs to help explain the risk and fear associated with fire in the towns (49). She describes how the laws passed at the Fourth Lateran Council would have affected the first Euphemia’s potential marriage-partners (69). This amount of hypothetical situations, of educated guesswork, would probably not go over so well in an advanced academic text; but in a more popular history this method can effectively show how our ideas of what life was generally like in the Middle Ages would apply to individual people who lived in those times.

Elizabeth Sutherland states in her acknowledgements that she is telling this story as fact rather than as fiction (11). By the standards of the modern discipline of history, she often uses her sources inappropriately. In spite of romantic notions to the contrary, Highland life has not remained unchanged since the misty days of prehistory, and incantations, prayers and songs collected in the nineteenth century were not necessarily heard in the thirteenth. Sutherland admits that she “cannot claim that Euphemia knew the exact words of the charms and croons” which she quotes (87), but then arguing that nineteenth-century sources are “perhaps the nearest we can get to understanding [Euphemia’s] perception of life” (88), she puts the words and sentiments of modern material into medieval mouths. Thus she tells us that as soon as Euphemia “stepped outside she would reverence the sun. ‘Glory to thee, thou glorious sun. Glory to thee, thou face of the God of Life’” (32), and her only evidence that this might have happened is from six hundred years later. It would be more convincing if she could find a medieval person somewhere, anywhere, who said such a thing.

When Sutherland does return to medieval sources, she sometimes misuses them. For example, she wishes to demonstrate that “though romantic love was neither expected nor required when
marriages were arranged, women were as capable of passionate love for their husbands then as now" (71). Her “abundant proof of this” is found in the letters of Heloise to Peter Abelard which, while they certainly do show passionate love, do so in the context of people who had defied their families’ wishes and eloped, and who, after Abelard was castrated at the instigation of Heloise’s family, entered separate religious communities. Their letters may say plenty about love, but nothing about arranged marriages.

Since this book is aimed at a general audience, it is understandable that Sutherland would wish to keep her prose flowing without too many obtrusive references or tangents into scholarly debate on the subject at hand. Sutherland does provide a fairly extensive bibliography, as well as a brief selection of sources at the end of each chapter designed largely, it seems, to guide the reader interested in a particular topic to further readings. However, the infrequency of references to primary or secondary sources prevents the reader from checking most of Sutherland’s assertions. This severely diminishes this book’s value as a university text. When a student reads that “childbirth was cloaked in a great mantle of ritual and incantation and Eighrig’s mother for all her Christian beliefs would have mingled pagan with Christian practice and seen no sin in it” (27), there is no way to know whether this is an accepted fact, as it is presented, or just the opinion of the author. If a student is excited by Sutherland’s description of the physical make-up of medieval Perth as revealed by excavation (48), there is no information in the ‘sources’ section to point that student to the source of that information. Even when quoting statistics, Sutherland neglects to inform us where her information is from. At one point she tells us that in sixteenth-century England “it is reckoned that one in every forty women died in childbirth and that as many as two hundred out of every thousand children died before the age of five” (82). Reckoned by whom, we cannot know, for no reference to the source of this statistic is to be found. Further ambiguity is sometimes brought about by an inconsistently occurring misuse of commas. A sentence such as, “Robert died the following year in April 1390 and his ailing eldest son, baptised John, but calling himself Robert III at fifty-three became his successor” (202),
confuses the reader as to whether Robert became king at fifty-three, changed his name at fifty-three, or both.

In addition to these ambiguities, some errors in fact have slipped in. Some dates are confused, rendering 1662 for 1262 (87), 1134 for 1334 (125), and 1557 for 1357 (148). This can perhaps be explained (although not condoned) by inaccurate keyboarding and sloppy proof-reading, but there are additional mistakes on a larger scale. Calling Christine de Pisan “the first woman to write for other women” (79), overlooks such renowned figures as Hrotswitha of Gandersheim and Hildegard of Bingen, to mention only two from the western tradition. Sutherland mixes up the presence of urban settlement with the legal privileges of burghs when she states that “towns … were creations of David I and his successors in the twelfth century” (48). The Dog-Days of summer were not so-called, as Sutherland tells us, because the shortage of supplies before the new harvest was brought in necessitated the putting down of old and hungry dogs (42-43), but because of associations of that time of year with the Dog-star and beliefs that the season’s unwholesome influence made dogs more apt to run mad.

While Sutherland’s evocative style and imaginative use of source material would make for engaging and well-informed historical fiction, her choice of sources and her interpretation of them frequently do not meet the standards of the modern, academic discipline of history. This does not mean that the book should go unread. Because of its uncritical use of source material, as least so far as the standards of academic history are concerned, Five Euphemias would be an inappropriate university text unless, of course, a discussion of methodology were central to the study of the book. The errors in fact detract even from its integrity as an entertaining and generally informative book for the general reader. In the end, however, a newcomer to Scottish history would learn many things from this book and should not be discouraged from picking it up, although perhaps some reminder that this is not professional history would be in order.

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