

Old
Wives'
Tales

Clare Heath-Whyte

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For David, Katie and George

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This book is so refreshing! Clare introduced me to real women. The wife who used all her wealth to promote the Gospel inspired me. The wife who undermined her husband's joy and work warned me. Before I read this book I worried that I would be condemned by the perfect lives of these wives. Instead, I found that they needed God's grace and forgiveness every day ... like me!

Liz Cox, Family Worker, St Giles' C of E Church, Derby

Reading Christian biographies can sometimes leave us feeling inadequate in comparison, but this book in contrast presents seven very real women complete with weaknesses, failures, and imperfections. Although they lived at a very different time and in a very different culture each encounter challenges us to consider our attitudes to our own circumstances today. This is a great introduction not only to these women who served God in the past but also to an important period in church history. It will be a wonderful resource for women's groups as it comes complete with bible studies at the end of each chapter.

Karen Soole, Chairwoman of the Northern Women's Convention

Fascinating, insightful, challenging — both men and women, young and old alike, will benefit from this terrific book on some of the great evangelical women of church history. It made me pray for more like them, in zeal and in godliness, and could be one of the instruments God uses to answer that very prayer.

Lee Gatiss, Director of Church Society and Adjunct Lecturer in Church History at Wales Evangelical School of Theology.

With vivid and colourful detail, Clare Heath-Whyte records the stories of these women who would mostly be unheard of if it wasn't for their famous husbands, but whose lives have much to teach women today about living for and serving Jesus wholeheartedly. They are not all great examples to follow; Clare is honest about the weaknesses and failings of these women. But there are lessons to learn from each and the readers are challenged to consider whether similar attitudes or habits are hindering godliness and spiritual growth in their own lives. This book is hugely relevant and helpful. I thoroughly recommend it!

Carolyn Lacey, Woodgreen Evangelical Church, Worcester

I loved Claire Heath-Whyte's book about real women, striving to live faithfully for Christ in a culture that was hostile to the Christian message. These 18th Century women seem strangely familiar - they struggled in their relationships with others and with God. Their lives were by no means perfect and some of them were not even that interesting. The unbelieving world criticised them and held them up to ridicule. Claire's book shows us how God works in and through his people despite their failings and difficulties. A great book for personal encouragement or for reading with a group.

Amanda Robbie - Author and blogger

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With grateful thanks to everyone who has helped this book along its way.

To all at the Proclamation Trust ministers' wives' conferences over the years who have given me the excuse to find out about the fascinating women mentioned in this book.

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To Katie, whose leaving the nest prompted me to do something new to fill the gap.

To Dorothy and Nick Jones, for freeing up my Mondays for writing.

To George, for giving me computer time and putting up with me, and the Old Wives, for the past six months.

To David and my parents for reading the manuscript and making encouraging comments, and to Vaughan for not only reading it, but also providing the foreword.

To David (again) – in the words of John Newton:

I can do more business in two days when you are at home than in three when you are abroad. For though I sit many an hour in my study without seeing you, yet to know that you are in or about the

house, and that I can see you when I please, gives a sort of composure to my mind: ... Though my attention to you may me leave something undone which I ought to have done...

*My comfort and my care,
My safety and my snare,
You have been and you are!*

However, I have great reason to bless God that I ever saw you.

(John Newton, Olney, 4 May 1774)¹

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FOREWORD

Despite the title of this book, please don't imagine that the author is old. She is in fact remarkably young – exactly the same age as me. That is not as much a coincidence as you might think, as she happens to be my twin. She entered the world a little before me, as she never tires of mentioning, and claims that those were the best ten minutes of her life.

She may not be old, but she is certainly a wife – and a mother. That explains why, even though she is far more able than me, she is a few years behind me in writing her first book. It combines all her passions – history, family and, above all, Christ and his gospel. I may be biased, but I really do think it's superb and I am sure you will too.

No one could doubt the huge contribution of women in the great Evangelical Revival in the eighteenth century, having read this book. The old saying 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world' is no doubt overstated, but the influence of these seven women was immense. Clare brings their characters vividly to life in ways that will both attract and, at times, repel. They lived in very different times from ours, but their examples, for good and ill, have much to teach us today.

It's certainly not only a book for women. Men should read it too. Not just to enjoy the stories, but to be inspired by how greatly women can enhance their life and ministry, cautioned about unwise marriage choices, and chastened by the marital failings of even the greatest preachers. The individuals who emerge are not plaster cast saints, but real human beings. If God can use them, with all their faults, why not us?

Vaughan Roberts

INTRODUCTION

Why would anyone bother to read about a load of women who lived more than two hundred years ago in a world very different from our own and in a rather obscure century? Surely the sixteenth century would be more interesting? It's familiar, it's fun – it's got Henry VIII and his six wives and Queen Elizabeth and the Spanish Armada. Or perhaps even the nineteenth century: Queen Victoria, railways, *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*; Even the seventeenth century has Cavaliers and Roundheads, the plague and the Fire of London. The eighteenth century is generally seen as the boring bit in between, at least in Britain: the agricultural revolution and lots of dull kings called George.

The kings may have been a bit dull and/or mad and there are certainly more interesting things to study than the invention of the seed drill, but in terms of church history, the eighteenth century is one of the most exciting and important of all. The great nineteenth-century bishop J.C. Ryle said that at the start of the eighteenth century from 'a religious and moral point of view, England was sound asleep'.¹ By the start of the nineteenth century, it was very much awake. Evangelicals were becoming influential in all areas of life, from politics to education and business. Lives were changed as the gospel was preached and its implications for society were realized.

What had made the difference? The Evangelical Revival had made the difference – led by great men such as John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield in Britain, Jonathan Edwards in America, and built on by the following generation of men such as John Newton.

But why bother with the women? Most of them were not exceptional. They were ordinary Christian women, trying to live for Christ in challenging times. If they had not been related to these great men we almost certainly would know nothing about them. But because they were, we do, and the way they served Jesus in their lives can encourage us as we seek to serve Him in ours. They are part of that 'great cloud of witnesses' of faithful believers from the past, whose lives can encourage us to 'run with perseverance the race marked out for us'.²

In many ways the challenges facing these women in the eighteenth century were very different from our own. There was no struggle to maintain a work-life balance – the concept of a career woman was a long way in the future. Education for women was rare, and from birth the likelihood was that they would be dependent on their father, husband or sons. For almost all married women, life consisted of childbearing, child-rearing and household chores – without any of the labour saving devices that we take for granted. It was a very tough life; no antibiotics or painkillers, and around 40 per cent of the population died in childhood. Grief and pain were

everyday experiences. There were no pensions, NHS or benefits, and real poverty and hunger beckoned if the breadwinner was ill, grew old, died, or, in the case of Susanna Wesley's husband, Samuel, went to prison.

However, in some ways, although the details may have been very different, the difficulties of living a godly life in an ungodly world were similar to our own. Morality was something to be mocked. Drunkenness was rife, and although there were no cars, even in London, very few street lights, town centres on a Saturday night in the eighteenth century would in many ways seem familiar to us today. Hogarth's prints of *Gin Lane* show crowds of people guzzling cheap alcohol – it was said you could get drunk for a penny and dead drunk for tuppence. This situation had arisen as a direct result of government policy to support the distilling industry. Like today, profit trumped morality. It was a time when the slave trade was developing fast, and high-class prostitutes such as Kitty Fisher³ enjoyed celebrity status, with the press printing every detail of their sexual adventures. Child prostitution was common, and after the restraint of the English republic under Cromwell, all the old vices were back with a vengeance – bear-baiting, cockfighting – whatever took your fancy. There were also the everyday temptations to conform rather than be transformed; to trust in self rather than Christ; to complain about, rather than be content with, the life God has given us. As now, it was not an easy time to be a godly woman.

The church did not provide much of a lead, either. Although Jane Austen wrote at the start of the nineteenth century, the Church of England she described was similar to that in the eighteenth century. Clergy, like Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, were often from wealthy families. 'The church' was a respectable occupation, leaving plenty of time for hunting and visiting friends. Any genuine Christian 'enthusiasm' was frowned upon. The Church of England seemed more concerned about conforming to society than challenging it. Nonconformist churches were not much better. Having sprung up in the much freer atmosphere during and after the Civil War, things had gone downhill. After the restoration of the monarchy and the introduction of the new prayer book in 1662, ministers who refused to use it were denied a licence, and nonconformist churches had become pernicky, dogmatic and inward-looking, with little concern for the lost.

Those women who tried, and often succeeded, in living a faithful Christlike life in that atmosphere can surely teach us something as we try to do the same more than two hundred years later.

Clare Heath-Whyte

Author's Note: There are names and places in this book where spelling appears as original.