

Nubili e celibi tra scelta e costrizione (secoli XVI-XX), edited by Margareth Lanzinger and Raffaella Sarti, SIDeS, Udine, Forum, 2006, 318 pp., €26.00 (paperback), ISBN 88-8420-350-3

The eight essays which make up this attractively presented volume are the outcome of a panel of the Convegno della Società Italiana di Demografia Storica on *Matrimonio e famiglia in Italia* in Florence in 2003. While several studies since the 1970s in English have centered on the plight of single women in Western societies, the volume is original insofar as it offers an historical perspective on predominantly Italian single women and also men from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. The first part of the volume is devoted to seven case studies of singlehood from different time periods and from various geographical areas of Italy. Four are on single women (nuns and ‘spinsters’), one deals with men, and two with both women and men. The second part of the volume comprises a long essay offering an overview of the status of single women and men over the whole period covered by the book.

The volume opens with a brief yet informative preface in which the editors draw attention to several important websites listing studies carried out thus far on singlehood in English in the fields of women’s and gender studies. In addition, they put forward their rationale for a comparative historical study of both women and men in this field. The first essay in the volume is a case study on the Florentine monastery of Santa Verdiana in the 1600s. Drawing on substantial archival work and genealogical sources, Francesca Medioli argues convincingly that admissions to the convent were determined to a large extent by matrilinearity: girls could secure a place in the convent through their network of aunts, great-aunts, cousins and distant relatives who had lived there. Continuing with the subject of Florentine nuns, Silvia Evangelisti’s contribution examines the social

hierarchies prevalent in convents between nuns who came from aristocratic and mercantile families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While offering an all-female space for meditation, education and prayer, *Evangelisti* shows how convents also re-created the class divisions and privileges of the aristocracy, which persisted as late as the 1960s. Querciolo Mazzonis's article discusses the Brescian Ursulines. These were a religious order of nuns founded by Angela Merici in 1535, who lived among the people rather than in convents, and who in many respects represented a prototype of the modern day single woman (Mazzoni, 49). The Ursulines were innovative figures; financially self-sufficient, they could live alone and did not need permission to leave their homes, though they were subject to circumscriptions outside; for example, they could not participate in public celebrations (theatre performances, weddings), they had to walk quickly along streets and could not loiter on balconies. On the topic of singlehood among marginalized secular women in Florence (spinsters, prostitutes, adulterous women), Lucia Sandri's contribution draws on the admissions registers of the foundling hospital in Orbatello between 1755 and 1766 to discuss illegitimate mothers, while Sandra Cavallo's essay—the only case study on men—provides an account of single working-class men who were active as *barbieri-chirurghi* in Turin between the mid-1600s and early-1700s. The first section of the volume concludes with two studies of single women and men in particular areas of Italy: Margareth Lanzinger examines the high proportion of single women and men in southeast Tirol in 1880 (among the age group 41-60 years single people made up around 35-50% of the population), while Angelo D'Ambrosio considers middle-class single women and men from Ruvo di Puglia between 1700 and 1800.

The second part of the volume is made up of Raffaella Sarti's impressively broad contribution, which purportedly discusses the history of single women and men in Western Europe from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries, though the focus is largely on northern Italy. Sarti shows how marriage was a far less universal experience in the past than certain notions of the 'traditional family' would have us believe (in 1427 single women and men represented around 50% of the population in Italy (146)), and that the lives of those who chose not to marry, or who could not marry, were numerous and multifaceted. Though the essay is ambitious in what it sets out to cover chronologically and geographically, its purpose is to provide a general overview to the preceding case studies. Sarti draws heavily on secondary sources to present a history of 'everyday singlehood' (278) in its numerous aspects in (largely) Catholic Europe—as nuns and spinsters, as seen in the case studies, but also as clergymen or *cicisbei*—arguing that there were many more dignified possibilities of being single open to men (271) (she does not suggest that in the case of the clergy and *cicisbei* these were covers for homosexuality). Indeed, what is strikingly absent—as the author herself acknowledges (281)—is a discussion of prostitutes, courtesans, or single gays and lesbians. One other aspect that weakens the overview is that it contains a considerable degree of repetition, both from the case studies and within the essay itself, and Sarti's use of language is often colloquial ('non avevano la più pallida idea' (187)). Moreover, frustratingly, the reader is frequently sent on a paper trail through the inclusion of copious references to footnotes (of which there are three-hundred) which refer the reader to a previous or later paragraph within the main text.

Notwithstanding these features, the volume as a whole offers a thought-provoking study of cultural history and gender studies in the Italian context at undergraduate level and beyond, making a strong case for re-evaluating received notions of singlehood throughout the modern era and mainly in Italy.