
This is the first published collection of writings of Elizabeth Cooke Hoby Russell, who was called by Thomas Lodge “our English Sappho” (262), indicating her contemporary reputation as a learned woman. The volume contains her correspondence, poems, monuments, epitaphs, and legal writings, a pastoral entertainment composed for one of Queen Elizabeth’s regional progresses, and a translation of Protestant leader John Ponet’s treatise on the Eucharist, as well as a number of works by other people that offer context for Russell’s writings. The works are presented in four divisions corresponding to segments of Russell’s life: first as Lady Hoby, second as Lady Russell, third as a courtier after the legal battles on behalf of her Russell daughters were concluded, and fourth as the dowager Lady Russell in her final years.

Born in 1540, one of the five daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke, a Protestant leader and tutor to Edward VI, Russell was a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth, with whom her life not surprisingly was linked, and she was well-educated for her role at court. Her family connections placed her at the center of court life, politics, and power. She was sister-in-law
to William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth’s secretary of state, and aunt to both Robert Cecil, who succeeded his father as Queen Elizabeth’s chief minister, and to writer and philosopher Francis Bacon. Many of her extant letters are to William or Robert Cecil.

She married Sir Thomas Hoby, diplomat and translator of *The Courtier*, who died while serving as ambassador to France, leaving the pregnant Elizabeth with three children, soon to be four, under the age of six. Her first surviving manuscript poem is a Latin elegy mourning him as the “sweetest of spouses” (50), and his was the first monument she commissioned. On the monument, she describes the two of them as having been as a couple such a “lucky pair” (84). She later married John Russell, son of Francis, second earl of Bedford. John Russell also died young, leaving Elizabeth with two small daughters, who were largely disinherited because their father had died before their grandfather, and the latter’s will, unrevised after John’s death, was contested by other family members. One of Russell’s ongoing legal battles in subsequent years was to provide for her daughters’ futures and dowries. Given the conventions of the era in which Russell lived and the pieces of Russell’s writings that have survived, many of them soliciting favor, we of necessity see Russell through her relationships to the men in her life and at court, but there is an irony in doing so because, as Phillippy well argues, Russell’s writings portray a capable, confident woman also connected to a circle of talented women.

Because Russell until now has been associated most frequently with her legal battles, she has had a reputation of having been difficult. And she may have been. Certainly she was capable of being direct and aggressive in supporting her daughters and defending what she saw as her rights, and in women that attitude often has been conflated with being difficult. In 1599 she wrote Robert Cecil somewhat undiplomatically to let him know that “most vile words have been openly uttered of you” at a public house (241) and in another urged him to remove a judge from the bench: “I would willingly lose a yearly value for one year of my copyhold that he might lose his place” (286). Her writings, however, also portray other aspects of her personality and explore her experiences as a young widow, a mother losing a child, or a Protestant hoping that her Catholic friend Mary Talbot, countess of Shrewsbury, might read a book Russell was sending and be converted: “Sweet lady, read it thorough” (301).
In her writings, we see Russell asking for forgiveness for a student expelled from Cambridge for criticizing proposed college policies, advocating for offices for her friends, handling real estate transactions and home remodeling, worrying about her children, and bemoaning the cost of the expected New Year’s gifts for members of the court. Through her writings, a world of personalities and patronage, of love and loss, comes alive in glimpses.

The edition has been carefully prepared. Phillippy provides an excellent and concise introductory discussion of Russell’s life, milieu, and writings. She offers a strong textual introduction as well, considering the autograph letters, the neoclassical poems and funeral materials, and the documents that appear, from transcripts of bills to Russell’s final will and testament. This edition is unusual in providing a number of pieces not by Russell but that offer context for her works. These include, for example, Queen Elizabeth’s letter on the death of Sir Thomas Hoby, describing him as “so able a servant” and praising Lady Hoby’s “sober, wise, and discreet behaviors” during such a difficult time of loss (69); a petition Russell signed opposing James Burbage in the creation of the Blackfriars Theater in her neighborhood because it would be noisy, attract the “vagrant and lewd persons that, under color of resorting to the plays . . . work all manner of mischief,” and increase the spread of plague (265); and dedications to her as a patron. The works in the edition are presented in modern spelling, with abbreviations and contractions expanded, punctuation emended, and paragraph breaks inserted. Annotations are useful to both the general reader and the scholar. Russell’s writings in other languages are presented first in the original and then in English translation.

In short, this volume will appeal to readers from many disciplines: literature, history, cultural studies, women’s studies, politics, religious studies, and more. In it, Russell and her world are presented in a thoughtful and transdisciplinary manner that looks to monuments as well as poems and to bills as well as pastoral entertainments to provide an inclusive view of a woman’s works.

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