Helen J. Nicholson, *Women and the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). Print, vii, 287 pp., $34.95 USD, ISBN: 9780798806721; ebook ISBN: 9780191980701.

Review

Did women really have anything to do with the crusades? Yes, answers internationally respected crusades and military orders historian, Helen Nicholson. In fact, she argues, their involvement was so integral and multifaceted that 'the crusade movement needed women' (p. 162). While this claim may not come as a surprise to those familiar with the scholarship of crusading, including Nicholson's own numerous earlier works on the subject, it is a point that merits sustained exploration for a more general audience, something that this book certainly achieves. Here, Nicholson provides examples of women who directly and indirectly supported the crusade movement, broadly conceived, and shows that their involvement was not, in fact, the exception it is often assumed to have been. In the Western popular imagination, the crusades remain an enterprise of often-romanticised chivalric masculinity divorced from complex entanglements with the range of contexts now considered central to the movement's history by scholars; therefore, Nicholson's work takes important steps to add much-needed nuance to reductive imaginings of the crusades.

In essence, this is a book that "repeoples" the medieval past in the tradition of feminist scholars of the Middle Ages since the 1970s, identifying — as far as the

sources allow — historical women and their lived experiences. Nicholson's study spans all theatres of crusading activity between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries and has a dazzling cast of historical figures from across Europe, North and East Africa, and West Asia. The book draws on an impressive range of source materials, from the more well-known narrative texts to episcopal and papal registers, charters, letters, legal documents, and hagiographical material, to present a series of historical vignettes illustrating the variety of women's participation.

Chapter One contains accessible introductions to thorny questions of definition (what was a crusade, and how did crusades differ from pilgrimage more generally?) and outlines some of the source material's pitfalls when undertaking such a project. Arguably, the most significant are the silences of the contemporary or near-contemporary texts when it comes to women and their roles in the crusade movement. As Nicholson explains, informing these silences were historical expectations about both what a crusade campaign and a crusade text should look like. Nicholson also alludes to broader discourses about normative femininities — what she calls 'stereotype[s]' (p. 14) — and the problems these pose for accessing "what really happened", thereby introducing a methodological quandary that resurfaces throughout the book as it navigates presenting an empirical survey of women's roles while drawing upon some highly narrative source materials. A consequence of this is that, at times, Nicholson concedes that a given anecdote might tell us more about contemporary attitudes and expectations than the actions of a real historical individual. This is an entirely convincing point but one that introduces a

tension that merits more sustained theoretical reflection than the present book's remit necessarily allowed. Regardless, Nicholson demonstrates that despite supposedly normative ecclesiastical discourses decrying women's participation in the crusades, the aggregate of extant evidence shows that women's participation in the crusading movement was the norm.

Chapters Two to Five work thematically through the varying ways in which women might be involved, directly or indirectly, with the crusading movement, following the crusade expedition from origins to memorialisation. In Chapter Two, on women's roles in initialising crusades, Nicholson comes up against further pervasive, gendered *topoi*; the weeping woman desperate to prevent her male loved ones from going on crusade and its antithesis, the dutiful, pious woman who urged her husband, sons, brothers and so on to take the Cross. Both are more fruitfully approached — as Nicholson recognises — as normalising tales (how not to behave versus how to ideally behave respectively) than as hard-and-fast evidence for how women behaved when their family members departed on crusade. This chapter highlights noble women and queens were involved in supporting crusades and similar enterprises by lending their authority to calls for campaigns, engaging in diplomatic negotiations, recruitment, or otherwise promoting an expedition. Throughout the book, Nicholson acknowledges that not every example concerns a formal crusade, which is understandable given the bleeding out of crusade rhetoric and ideology in contexts such as the Iberian Peninsula.

Chapter Three is the most substantial chapter, dealing with women's roles when on campaign. Nicholson shows that women who went on crusade usually accompanied their husbands, and this appears to have been the case for women of both low and high status, though it is the latter for whom we have the most extant evidence. Women participants had both proscribed and prescribed roles. In fact, the prescribed roles for women on crusade were understood to be so commonplace that we have hardly any evidence for them; tasks like delousing, laundry and care of the sick were rarely the stuff of grand crusade narrative. However, women can be shown to have fulfilled a range of roles while on crusade, including sex work, labouring tasks, acting as maidservants to noble women, midwifery, and participating in communal penitential activities.

In Chapter Four, Nicholson considers the activities of women who remained at home while their family members went on crusade. Again, the available evidence is heavily weighted towards the actions of noble and wealthy women. Their activities, such as managing regencies, overseeing estates, raising of ransoms and other funds, donations to military orders, settlement of debts and other acts of advocacy, were the most likely to have been documented. Clearly, many women who were 'left behind' (p. 97) could nonetheless be considered participants in the crusade effort, as they purchased indulgences or sponsored the campaigns of others, provided administrative and financial support, and contributed to broader communal spiritual activities. A crusade's sphere of influence could be wide-ranging indeed.

In the fifth chapter, Nicholson moves beyond the crusade itself to its aftermath, showing how women commissioned memorial architecture, endowed altars, and patronised cultural productions as part of the immediate commemoration and longer-term memorialisation of crusades and crusaders. In this section, Nicholson explains that not only have we hitherto underestimated women's roles in the crusades themselves, but also as agents in the ongoing manufacture of crusade memory. After a brief concluding is provided a useful chronology of the period covered by the book, a list of popes, and four detailed family trees. These family trees illustrate a recurring theme in the book demonstrating the integral role of women within dynastic expectations concerning crusade support.

This book is evidently the product of decades of accumulated research expertise and is panoramic in its scope. A consequence of this latter point is that the book spins some analytical threads that would have benefited from being brought together in more sustained ways. In particular, the book's hints at regional and temporal variation in women's roles merit further exploration. Nonetheless, this book undoubtedly succeeds as a detailed and convincing reminder that the history of the crusades is so much more than just a history of men on battlefields.

Beth C. Spacey
University of Queensland