Book review:
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Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain, edited by Heidi Eggington and Zoë Thomas (London: University of London Press, 2021; pp xvi + 344, £40.00).

We live in troubled times, and it is no surprise to see the concept of 'precarity' take the leap from contemporary political and sociological discourse into works of history. As editors Heidi Eggington and Zoë Thomas note soberly in their acknowledgements, this collection 'took shape during several tumultuous years in British politics and rounds of university strikes, and was completed in the early stages of a global pandemic in 2020, by which time the nature and experience of precarity had taken on meanings we could never have foreseen' (pviii). Papers that originated in a 2015 conference panel blandly entitled 'Gender and the Professionalization of "Culture"' became the more focused *Precarious Professionals*, and it is understandable that the topic is particularly meaningful for many of the early-career contributors. This is not to suggest that a present-day agenda is conspicuous or has a distorting effect. The chapters are, without exception, works of careful empirical scholarship that reach nuanced conclusions and call for further research. What the book demonstrates is that precariousness - defined as 'an insecure or marginal economic, social, cultural or psychological position' (p. 39) - offers a valuable lens through which to examine professional identities across the modern period, especially in conjunction with gender.

The chapters are all, implicitly or explicitly, in conversation with Harold Perkin's classic text, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (1989), which places professionalisation, with its associated processes of instruction, qualification, codification and exclusion, at the heart of economic and social change. Much has been written about the development of the leading professions, particularly law, medicine and financial services, and how they operated to develop hierarchies that institutionalised the position of white, male, middle-class university graduates. These authors have been challenged to question and complicate this familiar narrative by considering professionalisation as being far more elastic, fragile and contested than usually presented. The case studies range far beyond the high-profile professions to include cultural activities (art criticism, metal-working, ballet), scientific research, humanitarian work, and service in the League of Nations Secretariat and the Foreign Office. More importantly, the focus is upon individuals, often women,

who were excluded or distanced from the centres of professional power, and who therefore had to work creatively to establish and maintain their professional expertise and authority. This includes female scholars unable to participate in learned societies or academic networks (there are chapters on scientists and historians); artists, critics and cultural practitioners forced to navigate the gendered stereotypes and expectations around creativity and artistic production; women in law or the civil service who forged careers despite being unable to obtain the requisite certification (such as Eliza Orme, the first Englishwoman to achieve a law degree at the University of London) or were prevented from taking up the positions for which their skills and experience qualified them (Rachel Crowdy and others in the inter-war League of Nations bureaucracy). We hear about women like Francesca Wilson and Mary Agnes Hamilton who went through numerous career changes and shifts in direction: precarious professionals did not usually have the smooth progression up a neatly defined hierarchy expected by those with greater status. Nor are men excluded from consideration. James Southern offers a fascinating examination of how homosexuality troubled ideas of professional responsibility in the post-Second World War Foreign Office, while Ren Pepitone provides a fresh take on the training of barristers by looking at how homosocial relationships at the Victorian Inns of Court underwrote ideas of gentlemanly professionalism.

This is a diverse and wide-ranging collection - twelve chapters, encompassing the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century, as well as a substantial Introduction and an insightful Afterword by Christina de Bellaigue - and it is impossible to do justice to the contents in a brief review. Inevitably some chapters illuminate the central themes more clearly than others, and a few could usefully have had longer conclusions to reflect on how the specific case studies under discussion contribute to the broader analysis. Overall, though, the editors are to be commended for producing such a rich and coherent collection. By the end it is difficult to disagree that Perkin's model has significant limitations, and that historians should use a more capacious definition of professionalisation. As de Bellaigue observes, what emerges is a 'notion of "profession" as centred on the self, the personal, and on individualized patterns of progression', and, as a consequence, scholars should focus on the ways in which people in different circumstances were able, or unable, to perform and cultivate a 'satisfying professional selfhood'. In addition to the powerful intervention in the

debate on professionalisation, the life stories recovered here will be of interest to a wide range of social, cultural and gender historians. As well as being available to buy in hardback and paperback, the collection can be downloaded free as a PDF from the University of London Press's website; this should ensure the wide readership the book deserves.

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