

Sister Historians in Early Victorian England

Sister Historians in Early Victorian England:

Agnes and Eliza Strickland

By

David M. Fahey

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



Sister Historians in Early Victorian England: Agnes and Eliza Strickland

By David M. Fahey

This book first published 2026

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2026 by David M. Fahey

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN: 978-1-0364-6608-4

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-6609-1

To my wife Mary and our daughter Juliana.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	ix
About the Illustrations	xi
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two	12
The Strickland Family	
Chapter Three	18
Agnes Strickland (1796-1874)	
Chapter Four	28
Eliza Strickland (1794-1875)	
Chapter Five	34
Celebrity Historian	
Chapter Six	44
Research and Publishing	
Chapter Seven.....	51
Victorian and Modern Historians	
Chapter Eight.....	61
The Stricklands and the Tudors	
Chapter Nine.....	71
The Stricklands and the Stuarts	
Concluding Observations	77
Appendix: Canadian Stricklands	78

Bibliography.....	83
Notes.....	92
Index of Names.....	115

PREFACE

This is the first book-length academic study of the English Stricklands. It combines biographies of Agnes and Eliza Strickland, an evaluation of them as scholars, and an account of the mixed Victorian reception of the *Lives of the Queens of England*. The new feminist respect for the Stricklands' challenge to male Whig historiography makes this book timely. A conversation about Agnes and Eliza is overdue.

An appendix acknowledges the importance of the Strickland sisters who had emigrated to Canada and who through letters were part of the lives of the English Stricklands. As a result of research by Canadian scholars, more has been written about Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill than the sisters who remained in England. Susanna and Catharine Parr are now celebrities. In contrast, Agnes is no longer a celebrity. By choice Eliza never was.

For me, this has been a work of discovery. In my only previous publication about women historians in Victorian England, I sketched the life and career of the forgotten Bertha Meriton (Cordery) Gardiner (1845-1925) who differed from Agnes and Eliza Strickland in everything but gender. (*Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 29 no. 1, 2025). The women historians of Victorian England were numerous and varied.

I could not have written this book without the scholars whose work I cite. For their ideas and research, I owe much. Judith Zinsser encouraged me to rethink feminism. Charlotte Gray introduced me to the large scholarly literature about the Strickland sisters who had emigrated to Canada. Her book about them provided primary source quotations otherwise unavailable to me. I am grateful to Christine Fisher for her books about the Strickland family, and I have relied also on many other researchers for what they found in the archives. For the Stricklands as historians, I am especially indebted to Mary Sponberg, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, and Rosemary Mitchell.

The Index of Names excludes Agnes and Eliza and only selectively cites names in footnotes.

As with my previous books, I thank King Library at Miami University for borrowing books not in its own collection. I made much use of the Internet and its specialized services such as ProQuest. How else could I have found a good master's thesis about Agnes Strickland written at an obscure Texas state college?

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS

My favorite picture of Agnes Strickland is the frontispiece in Jane Margaret Strickland's nineteenth-century biography. It is an engraving of a watercolor painted by George Cruikshank. Jane Margaret said (p. 174): "After she became stouter, a half-length in watercolours by Cruikshank represents more truly the Agnes Strickland of latter days."

Better known is the painting by John Hayes done in oils in June 1846, when Agnes was fifty. In 1875, after Agnes' death, a bequest presented it to the National Portrait Gallery. The Hayes painting is 3/4 length, representing an attractive woman with an intelligent expression, a pale complexion, black hair and brown eyes. Over a white undergarment, she wore a dark velvet dress, and she held a scroll with illuminated borders. As engraved by F. C. Lewis, it became the frontispiece to *Historic Scenes and Poetic Fancies* (1850) and the 1851 edition of the *Lives of the Queens of England*.

Agnes' twentieth-century biographer Una Pope-Hennessy said (p. 172) about the Hayes portrait that "a good deal of the strength of character evident in photographs has been ironed out of her face in the process of making an amiable and flattering picture." Agnes Strickland's sister, Sarah Gwilym, wrote about the Hayes portrait: "It is so dearly valued by all her family as an exact resemblance of her thirty years ago" (2 October 1874, in NPG archives). In her biography, Jane Margaret (p. 174) said "At the time that it was painted the likeness was very striking for she was thinner than at any other time in her life." The portrait by Hayes has been used to illustrate many publications about Agnes Strickland such as the entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. I reproduce a photograph of the painting as shown in Wikipedia.

The Pope-Hennessy biography includes several black-and-white portraits of an aging Agnes in 1861, 1865, and 1873, for which Pope-Hennessy thanked Fanny Foster (1891-1975) who may have obtained them from a newspaper or magazine or from a Strickland collection which Foster had acquired. For a sketch of the little-known Foster, see the booklet by

Margot Strickland, *"I am Southwold": The Story of Fanny Foster* (Peacock, 1983).

Agnes told her mother about her visit in 1861 to the Queen's Drawing-room after the death of the Duchess of Kent. Describing her clothes for the royal occasion, she said that "I fear that head-dress must have given me the look of Bellona," the ancient Roman war goddess. (Pope-Hennessy, p. 267). The 1865 picture was occasioned by Agnes' visit to Oxford University where the students greeted her with cheers for the *Queens* historical biographies. As the students were eager for her photograph, she sat for her picture at an Oxford studio. The 1873 picture represents Agnes the year before her death.

Unfortunately, I know of no picture for the intensely private Elizabeth (Eliza) Strickland.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Forgotten today, Agnes Strickland with her reclusive sister Elizabeth wrote historical biographies that competed with novels in popularity.¹ Agnes and Eliza deserve to be rescued from their present obscurity.²

Although cultural historians still borrow from the Stricklands, other mainstream and feminist historians “have tended to either ignore or patronize the sisters.” The Stricklands’ “obsequious toadying to royalty” appalled them. As they did not see such women as caring about politics, historians seldom realized that the Stricklands sympathized with the Jacobites. When they did, the Stricklands were marginalized as critics of the “Glorious” Revolution.³ Until recently nearly all historians were Protestants who were offended by Eliza’s life of “Bloody Mary,” which dared to remember Mary Tudor as a good queen. Feminists who ordinarily championed women writers found the Stricklands unappealing because of their acceptance of the traditional gender roles of queens and other women. Agnes’ uncritical devotion to her romantic heroine Mary, Queen of Scots, did not help.

Literary and cultural scholars have begun to revise the old reputation of Agnes and Eliza Strickland as having been no more than popular writers of the colorful lives of royal women read by poorly educated middle-class women. Some revisionists see the Stricklands, loyal to the concept of separate spheres, as not focused on mannish political history, but the cultural historian Mary Spongberg forcefully argued that the Stricklands deliberately challenged the Whig interpretation of seventeenth-century England, notably in Eliza’s life of Henrietta Maria and Agnes’s life of Mary Beatrice of Modena.⁴

Revisionist scholars, nearly all of them women, come from Anglophone countries, Australian, American, Canadian, and British. The *Literary Encyclopedia* (2022) recognized Agnes’ originality as a historian. Its male author pointed out that Agnes “produced books that move toward revisionist

life writing—an expression of her resistance to the control of cultural norms shaping both her subjects and herself as a writer of history.”⁵

Feminists have failed to persuade many other historians that Agnes and Eliza are worth serious scrutiny. From the beginning, academic historians have been reluctant to acknowledge the Stricklands as fellow historians. For most historians, said Bonnie Smith, “truth was where women were not,” and the Stricklands were women.⁶ They were seen, not as true scholars, but as amateurs who being women wrote sentimental books filled with gossip and descriptions of how queens and their female attendants dressed.⁷ The Stricklands’ lack of academic credentials mattered, but their fundamental disqualification was being women. For the Strickland sisters (born in the 1790s) their gender meant that they had no way of earning academic credentials.⁸

“‘The study of women’s history’ frequently slips between ‘the history of women’ and ‘women as historians’ – with the ‘history of women,’ in turn, becoming ‘the history of women by women historians’.”⁹ In the Stricklands’ day, male historians were content to quarantine what women wrote in this way, but the Stricklands saw themselves as offering an alternative history, a feminine challenge to male historiography.

Sources for Agnes’ Life

As compared with most other woman historians, there is abundant information about Agnes.¹⁰ This is in part because a third sister in England, Jane Margaret, compiled a biography from otherwise lost sources. In addition, letters by Agnes to two sisters who had emigrated to Canada have survived, and recently some have been published. Scholars also have found a few overlooked letters in Britain. Enough new material has appeared to justify a supplement to two earlier biographies (1887 and 1940). In contrast with her sociable co-author, Eliza remained intensely private. Only fragments of her life can be glimpsed. For instance, who would have imagined that this hard-headed woman took part in *séances*?

Why Important

The Stricklands’ *Lives of the Queens of England*, initially published in twelve volumes (1840-48), was, said Lady Antonia Fraser, “vivid utterly

readable history, aimed to capture the general reader.”¹¹ The Stricklands were not the first women to write about the queens of England, but they became the most celebrated.¹²

The biography of Agnes Strickland written by a younger sister emphasized something other than the anecdotal character-driven writing praised by Fraser. “It is as documentary historians that the sister authors derive their chief value.”¹³ At a time when few male historians and almost no female ones did archival research, they pioneered the use of primary sources. Did they use them critically? Sadly, one must acknowledge, often not.

The Stricklands did not write for scholars. They regarded history as a form of literature which ordinary middle-class readers could enjoy.¹⁴ Writing about Agnes in 1855, the Scottish novelist Margaret Oliphant, entitled her article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* as “Modern Light Literature—History.”

Despite the Stricklands’ limitations, an American scholar, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, praised the sisters. “Agnes Strickland and her collaborator Elizabeth were at the forefront of the new, archive-based historical scholarship of the nineteenth century.”¹⁵ An Irish historian, Ciaran Brady, focused on their readers. He credited Agnes Strickland with “offering a fresh, scholarly, informed perspective to a more popular audience.”¹⁶ The new interest in the Stricklands includes women scholars outside Anglophone countries.¹⁷

The older Strickland sisters were introduced by their father to books of history and biography but not to primary source research. Why did Agnes and Eliza chose to rely on primary sources?¹⁸ The Strickland sisters could have written about the past by borrowing from other people’s books as many of their contemporaries, both male and female, did. Most likely, the Stricklands saw archival research as a way both of ensuring accuracy and of understanding the queens who were their subjects. By committing themselves to primary source research, the Stricklands educated themselves as biographical historians.¹⁹

In a preface to the second volume of the *Lives of the Queens of England*, Agnes thanked the great French historian François Guizot who had provided French sources about the medieval queens. He was Agnes’ foremost champion among serious historians and later made possible her research

with her sister Eliza in France on the Stuarts. In 1826-27 Guizot had published the first volumes of what he called the English Revolution, that of the seventeenth century. His second wife Eliza Dillon (d. 1833) descended from an Irish Jacobite family which had fled to France. In the same volume in which Agnes thanked Guizot, she also thanked the Catholic priest John Lingard for corrections and the Camden Society as well as her sister Elizabeth, “my fellow labourer and faithful assistant.”

Beginning with the third volume her footnotes became impressive, and according to Jane Margaret, the fourth volume created an “immense sensation.”²⁰ Its preface provided many details about sources, a kind of bibliography of the documents which she had consulted. The sixth volume, introducing the life of Elizabeth Tudor, “sold off as soon as it was in print” and was “reviewed with immense praise.”²¹

Why Celebrated

The Stricklands stand out among historians in early Victorian England for many reasons.²² The Stricklands were pathbreakers who energetically searched for primary sources in England, Scotland, France, and Holland, both documents and artifacts, and, with the help of a woman friend, acquired transcripts of letters from the Imperial Library at St. Petersburg. The Stricklands added women and social history to the story of England, supplementing history by men, mostly political and military. Although not feminists, Agnes and Eliza were womanists who valued the female contribution to society illustrated by the queens, and as writers the Stricklands could startle with a pithy insight, lines such as “The Reformation was cradled in the printing-press.”

Published at a time when the monarch was a young and popular queen, the *Lives* appealed to Victorian ideas about royal families. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century a rich literature of what might be called proto-feminism had prepared the way for the Stricklands. “The time was ripe for the publication of books about the achievements of women.”²³

Recognizing the importance of the *Lives*, the Cambridge University Press in 2010 digitally reprinted an eight-volume slightly revised edition which had been published in 1851.²⁴ A less expensive (and more

extensively corrected) six-volume edition, published in the mid-1860s, sold more than 11,000 copies, as part of Bohn's Historical Library.

The other major work written by the Strickland sisters, the *Lives of the Queens of Scotland*, was published in 1850-59.²⁵ It was less popular. As Eliza had no wish to be burdened with research on Scotland's medieval queens, the Scottish lives began with Henry VIII's sister Margaret Tudor. Volumes three through seven of its eight volumes were devoted to Mary, Queen of Scots. It was supplemented by an edition of Mary's correspondence. Agnes translated the Queen's letters from old French.

Controversy

Agnes saw what she wrote about the Queen of Scots as the greatest achievement of her career. On 2 June 1854, she told her publisher Backwood:

I flatter myself that I have redeemed my pledge to the public by removing the disfiguring stains with which self interested falsehood contrived to mar Scotland's best sovereign and loveliest woman. She will come forth now in her natural colours like a newly restored Guido or Titian that has been long disfigured with dust and injured by the interpolating hand of some base signpainter.²⁶

The Scottish queen was Agnes's heroine, her favorite of all queens. Critics complained about what they considered hagiography in describing a deeply flawed woman. Writing in 1995, Joan Thirsk contended that an uncritical championship of Mary, Queen of Scots, cast "a heavy shadow ... over [Agnes'] reputation as a historian."²⁷ Despite this controversy, another modern scholar Burstein argued that the books about Mary, Queen of Scots, added to Agnes' importance. Agnes' "work on Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I ... continues to influence modern scholarship and, indeed, historical fiction."²⁸

Angry with "No-Popery-howlers," for attacking the Scottish queen and her biographer as papists, Agnes told an antiquarian friend Cuthbert Bede:

As for poor Mary, I believe it was the villainy of [the earl of] Moray, and the ill manners of [John] Knox, that kept her from being the Queen of a reformation established on better grounds than that of spoliation of churches

and church-lands. As for me, her humble biographer, I have ever been a sincere member of the Church of England--a church that enjoins true witness, by exhorting us from her altar not to bear false [witness], an article of the decalogue little regarded by Mary's foes or mine.²⁹

Popular Reception

Although Eliza Strickland did much of the research and, arguably, the more provocative writing, she insisted that her co-authorship remain secret. The public thought that Agnes Strickland was the sole author. To the contrary, Queen Victoria read enough of the English *Lives* to suspect that it was the work of two authors with different writing styles.³⁰ Early in 1843 Victoria asked Agnes Strickland for an autograph to add to Her Majesty's collection.³¹

The *Lives* received immediate recognition. The *Times* (5 Sept. 1840) praised Agnes as "a lady of considerable learning, indefatigable industry, and careful judgement." The *Times* notice continued: "it will be a matter of surprise to most readers how large a mass of information, in many respects entirely novel, has been collected." Furthermore, "the volumes have the fascination of romance united to the integrity of history. The reader is instructed and pleased at the same time."

Unlike the enthusiastic *Times* reviewer, male critics such as Charles Kingsley were unimpressed with Agnes' sentimental and anecdotal evocation of courtly life.³² Agnes understood that such pageantry helped the Crown acquire popular acceptance.³³ Agnes recognized that queens and kings were morally complex and not simply bad or good, but with a few exceptions, her queens seem almost entirely good. In a youthful essay Agnes had said: "the highest pleasure of which the heart of woman is susceptible [is] that of perceiving she had an ennobling influence on the conduct of the man she loved."³⁴

The Stricklands contrasted the great men who were not heroes to their valets de chambre with the illustrious women whose virtues shown in their private life. "For owing to daily and hourly habits of self-control and self-government practiced by well-educated females in domestic life, from their infancy, many an illustrious woman has been a heroine in the eyes of her handmaiden."³⁵

Rosemary Mitchell pointed out that “in the nineteenth century, religion and things spiritual and moral were frequently seen as distinctly ‘feminine’.”³⁶ Eliza argued: “that the conduct of a man is almost invariably influenced by the moral qualities of the woman who has his heart in her keeping.”³⁷ Like other historians of her day, Agnes believed that history taught moral lessons. In the preface (xvi) of the opening volume of the *Queens of Scotland*, she said that “when truthfully told and philosophically considered [history] is the noblest school of ethics replete with moral teaching.”³⁸

Different Sources, Different Lives

What the Stricklands wrote about different queens depended on the sources available. Sometimes it was no more than royal costumes or not even that. For a few queens there were unexpected materials. In writing the life of Eleanor of Provence, Agnes could draw on the chronicle of Matthew of Paris to demonstrate the sad decline of English agriculture. Fruits such as apples, pears, cherries, and figs had become scarce or unavailable.³⁹ What had been common fruits in the reign of Henry III had to be reintroduced in the reign of Henry VIII.

For more recent queens, there often were abundant sources. Documents crowded Agnes’ life of Elizabeth Tudor. Almost 800 pages in length, this life was published separately as well as a part of the *Lives of the Queens of England*.

Eliza’s life of Mary Tudor was proof that it is unwise to generalize about the *Lives* as the social history of elite women and nothing else. What Eliza wrote was mostly political with a few bits of military history such as for Wyatt’s rebellion and a brief mention of the low standard of sanitation among the aristocracy. She drew on what then was recent archival research by Frederick E. Madden, Patrick Fraser Tytler, and others. Eliza pointed out that “almost the whole of the rich mass of documents lately edited by our great historical antiquaries, Madden and Tytler, are in direct opposition to the popular ideas of the character of our first queen-regnant.”⁴⁰ After the publication of the first edition, Eliza continued her research and, on its basis, made changes.⁴¹ As in other lives, Eliza did not forget royal clothing. She provided detailed description of what Philip wore when he came to England

for his marriage to Mary. For Mary, Eliza offered details of what she (and her horse) wore to the opening of the queen's third Parliament.⁴²

Miriam Elizabeth Burstein described the continued attacks on Agnes Strickland as gendered. "Strickland's declining reputation (but continuing sales appeal) throughout the [nineteenth] century indicates a critical desire [among male historians] to consolidate the criteria for 'scholarly' reading, even as historiography [what people read] resolutely remained popular or 'light' literature."⁴³

The Stricklands emphasized that their queens were Christian women. Burstein argued that "Strickland's domesticating rhetoric suggests that reading and writing these uneventful lives are themselves means toward social (and ultimately Christian) reform, but it also suggests that such reforms must already be under way for her writings to be properly appreciated." Burstein added that "in making the reading and writing of her history a triumph of love over force, Strickland alludes to her participation in exemplary history's larger pedagogical project: tutoring her readers in the proper work of both women in history and the history of women."⁴⁴

Although men were not the intended readers, they existed. For instance, in 1851 when Disraeli met Agnes he complimented her *Queens*.⁴⁵ The typical readers were middle-class women, and Victoria's marriage in February 1840 helped make the Stricklands' *Queens* popular with them. Agnes said that the first two volumes sold "like hot cakes."⁴⁶

Remembering Agnes

In the late 1830s Agnes and Eliza Strickland began their research at the British Museum. Years later an anonymous reviewer, the Scottish novelist Margaret Oliphant, writing in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1855, mocked Agnes Strickland as she arrived for a day of research. "Here she is--behold her--in the Library of the British Museum with her poke bonnet, her umbrella, her india-rubber overshoes; perhaps--most likely--sandwiches in her pocket There she sits all the dull November day, the London fog peering in at her through the big windows." She was no more than "the literary woman of business," who earned a living by writing, during "these days [of] the reduced pretensions of the historic muse" and not a great scholar such as Edward Gibbon.⁴⁷

When Agnes died, the contents of her library were sold at auction. Sotheby's *Catalogue of the Library of Miss Agnes Strickland* (1876) provides a hint of how much she read on diverse topics. Offered for sale were "212 lots of books in octavo size, 81 in quarto and 65 in folio. Among these lots were complete runs of periodicals and some manuscript materials."⁴⁸ The National Archives lists where today letters and papers of Agnes can be found and a few letters of Eliza.

Sadly, many other sources for the study of Agnes Strickland are no longer available. On her deathbed, Agnes gave directions about her "historical notes, manuscripts and relics. They were all in perfect order as were the many hundred letters she had received during fifty years of authorship. She desired that they be preserved as they would be of service to future historians."⁴⁹

According to the 1940 biographer of Agnes, her collection of pictures, prints, holograph letters, and historical knick-knacks, originally at the family home, Reydon Hall, passed on to Agnes's sister and early biographer, Jane Margaret Strickland. When Jane Margaret died in 1888, they passed in turn to a Canadian member of the Strickland family, Mary Agnes FitzGibbon (1851-1915).

At [FitzGibbon's] death the collection was dispersed and it seems likely that part was sold to satisfy the claims of legatees who could not agree as to their distribution. Docketed correspondence, historical notes and travel diaries were wanted by no one, and it would appear that the greater portion of the manuscripts were burned by the residuary legatee who had no room to house papers, and in any case was uninterested in their preservation.⁵⁰

The two existing biographies of Agnes add brief accounts of her sister and co-author Eliza. In 1887, a year before her own death, Agnes' sister Jane Margaret Strickland published the *Life of Agnes Strickland*. As it includes many letters and excerpts from journals written by Agnes and Eliza, Jane Margaret modestly calls herself the editor and not the author of the biography. She regretted (pp. 108-09) that "unfortunately [the journals were] always fragmentary with Agnes Strickland, whose numerous calls upon her time seldom left her opportunity for giving a daily and completed record."

In 2022 a small Glasgow publisher, the Good Press, reissued Jane Margaret's biography, with the addition of a subtitle that sought to engage twenty-first century readers, *A Literary Portrait of Victorian Women Writers*. The Good Press saw it as a major work and not just dull family hagiography. Seeking to sell books, the Good Press was over-the-top enthusiastic. It proclaimed that "Jane Margaret Strickland crafts a rich biographical narrative that intricately weaves the life of her sister, the notable historian Agnes Strickland, into the broader tapestry of 19th-century literary and feminist history." Despite the publisher's attempt to place Agnes in nineteenth-century feminist history, she was not a feminist.

In the mid-twentieth century Una Pope-Hennessy (1875-1949), wrote the standard life, *Agnes Strickland: Biographer of the Queens of England, 1796-1874* (1940). As a professional biographer, she was surprised that for Agnes there was no archive of correspondence and no private journals. She "began to believe that Miss Strickland was ... a celebrity who had disappeared leaving no trace behind."⁵¹ Pope-Hennessy was advised to look to Canada.

Well-researched for the time, well-written and richly illustrated, Pope-Hennessy's book was published to be read and not to be cited, so there are few and not very useful footnotes.⁵² It is a leisurely book that spends many pages on topics which deserved maybe two or three paragraphs, as for instance, Agnes' unfortunate book about the young Victoria, *From Birth to Bridal*. Pope-Hennessy wrote about some not very important things because she had sources for them. The author's father, Sir Arthur Birch, was Agnes's godson.⁵³ His daughter's book found space for a few lines about him as a young boy. After describing the meeting of Agnes and Eliza with Father Mathew, the Irish apostle of temperance, she paused to mention that her father-in-law, John Pope-Hennessy, was converted to teetotalism by Mathew.⁵⁴

Pope-Hennessy was critical of Jane Margaret's biography as unscholarly. Frustrated, at one point she unkindly referred to "her woolly way."⁵⁵ Yet she acknowledged that the 1887 biography preserved documents that otherwise would have been lost, and she borrowed from them. Pope-Hennessy regarded the work of Agnes and Eliza, written from "the woman's angle," as "epoch making." (pp. 3, 4) "Whatever their shortcomings, inaccuracies and partisan prejudices they went straight to sources, took nothing at second hand and produced highly readable books." (p. 4). Pope-Hennessy explained

why the success of the Stricklands was greater than their female competitors. It was due in part by the education that their father had given them and in part, as there were two of them, they wrote more than any rival woman.⁵⁶

The Stricklands wrote for grownups. Pope-Hennessy quoted an unnamed critic who compared them with women historians who did not. “The facts of importance stated by Miss Strickland about Catharine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn and Katharine Howard were such as a young lady would scarcely like to avow she had even read much less investigated.”⁵⁷

Pope-Hennessy had a higher opinion of Eliza as writer and historian than she did of Agnes, but it was the sociable Agnes whom she credited with obtaining entry to private collections in England and Scotland. After travels to northern England in the early 1840s and a visit to France in 1844, sister Eliza was content to do her research in London.

Pope-Hennessy said that Agnes’ aristocratic friendships “always seem to have begun with research and to have blossomed into affection: affection given to her.” In her final assessment, Pope-Hennessy was generous. Agnes was “a woman with a warm heart and a bright intelligence, faithfully friendly, vivacious in conversation, untiring in her will to please, ready at any time to share her great knowledge with the least informed, and beyond all this with an exhaustible capacity for enjoyment—that *joie de vivre* which radiates well-being and something approaching to happiness.”⁵⁸

Ironically, thanks to Canadian scholars, more has been written about the two Strickland sisters who emigrated to Canada than about the once celebrated Agnes.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STRICKLAND FAMILY

Eliza and Agnes were the eldest of eight Strickland children whose parents were Thomas Strickland (ca. 1758-1818) and his second wife Elizabeth (Homer) Strickland (1773-1864).⁵⁹ Thomas Strickland worked at various times as a wine importer, a shipping agent, and manager of the Greenland Dock on the Thames. Serving the East India Company, the Greenland Dock was a re-fitting facility that could accommodate many ships. Its well-paid manager was solidly middle class. Strickland also had income from property that he owned in the east end of London, while the Strickland home was in Rotherhithe on the south bank of the river. In 1802 the Stricklands left London when Thomas Strickland retired from Greenland Dock. For a time, the family lived at a house called the Laurels in Thorpe near Norwich.

Childhood of Strickland Daughters

In her late fifties Catharine Parr Traill, a Canadian Strickland, read a biography of Charlotte Brontë. She wrote in her journal, “There is so much in this book that reminds me of our own early years.”⁶⁰ Her childhood memories have survived for the period when the family lived from late 1803 to 1808 at Stowe House near the market town of Bungay.

We passed our days in the lonely old house in sewing, walking in the lanes, sometimes going to see the sick, and carry food or little comforts to the cottagers; but reading was our chief resource. We ransacked the library for books; we dipped into the old magazines of the last century, such as Christopher North styled “bottled dullness in an ancient bin,” and dull enough much of their contents proved. We tried history, the drama, voyages and travels, of which latter there was a huge folio. We even tried *Locke on the Human Understanding*. We wanted to be very learned just then; but, as you may imagine, we made small progress in that direction.

She added: “We read Ward’s *History of the Reformation in Rhyme*—a book that had been condemned to be burned by the common hangman. How this copy had escaped I never learned.”⁶¹ They also sampled the *Astrologer’s Magazine* “for tales of witchcraft and ghosts” to frighten the cook and the nursemaid.⁶²

Her great-niece Mary Agnes FitzGibbon provided a historical sketch of the young Stricklands at their home. “Here the children learned and acted scenes from Shakespeare Here Agnes and Elizabeth repeated to the younger children Pope’s ‘Homer’s Iliad,’ learned out of Sir Isaac Newton’s own copy, or told them stories from the old chronicles.”⁶³

Although the Strickland children had never seen a play, Eliza and Agnes wrote one about the Wars of the Roses. Eliza was a Yorkist, Agnes a Lancastrian.

Reydon Hall and Norwich

In 1808 Thomas Strickland purchased for £3,000 Reydon Hall located in eastern Suffolk. It was only a walk of an hour or two to the little North Sea fishing village of Southwold. Reydon Hall became the permanent Strickland home, and the purchase included seventy acres tilled by tenant farmers. Reydon Hall was a large, rambling, redbrick mansion, one wing built in 1682 and another part of the building even older. The furnishings of the drawing room included the writing desk of General Wolfe whose victory over the French won Quebec for the British. As an indication of its size, Reydon Hall today includes thirteen bedrooms and five full bathrooms.⁶⁴

The damp climate near the North Sea aggravated Strickland’s gout. His daughter Jane Margaret remembered that “when his right hand was disabled by gout, he used his left hand to write with—such was our father.”⁶⁵ When gout confined him to bed, Eliza and Agnes read to him until he fell asleep. Agnes’ assignment was to read him a newspaper. With his older children, Strickland spent the colder months in Norwich where his gout was less severe.

Some sources say that Thomas Strickland was a partner in a coach-making business at Norwich. Others say that Strickland’s role had been only as a guarantor for a company loan which it could not pay in 1815.⁶⁶ The facts are unclear except that he was no longer upper middle class when he

died in 1818. His estate was valued at under £4,000. His will required the sale of the coach-making business. His widow inherited a large home for her children but little money to staff and maintain it. Parts of the huge house were closed off. A visitor reported that it smelled of “rats and dampness and mould.”⁶⁷ At the time that their father died, the youngest Strickland children, two sons, were enrolled in a fee-charging school at Norwich. To pay expenses, General Wolfe’s desk and much else soon was sold. In 1825 the sons left England, Sam to farm in Upper Canada and Tom to a life on merchant sailing ships, travelling as far as India and Australia. The sisters remained at home at least for a time. In 1827 the farmland and buildings were rented for eight years and the livestock and equipment sold at auction.

Education of Eliza and Agnes

The Stricklands were a literary family. Agnes and Eliza Strickland were not the only members of their family to write books. Three other sisters and one brother wrote books too. When the Stricklands were growing up, there were few schools, certainly no colleges or universities for females. For six months the Stricklands employed a governess, but otherwise Thomas Strickland was the teacher of his older daughters.⁶⁸ His wife taught the younger ones how to read and needlework. There is no record for what the father’s own education had been. It could not have been typical for a man of business which is what he was. In later years his daughter Susanna Moodie remembered his impressive knowledge of science and literature. She said that he was an independent thinker who “paid little regard to the received opinions of the world.”⁶⁹

According to one of his daughters, “Papa approved of teaching girls upon the same plan as boys because he thought it strengthened the female mind; and I have heard him say that few ladies of the present day know how to converse rationally, because they have been taught in a superficial manner.”⁷⁰ Strickland taught his daughters history, mathematics, French and Latin (and the Greek alphabet). Elizabeth liked mathematics, but not Agnes. Agnes tried to teach herself Latin from an old book which had been part of her grandfather’s library.⁷¹ His name does not appear, and he nowhere else is mentioned. As his personal library included a book in Latin, Grandfather Strickland may have had some kind of formal education.

Thomas Strickland did not permit his daughters to read books for simple amusement. He let them read Shakespeare after they had enjoyed a volume of his plays that accidentally fell from a bookshelf. They later read Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad*. A daughter, Catharine Parr, said that her father eventually added other poetry. After the oldest daughters read to their father biographical and historical books, they discussed them with him.

According to her sister biographer, young Agnes Strickland "read and reread the two mighty folios of [Paul] Rapin's 'History of England,' translated by [Nicolas] Tindal, and improved by his learned notes; and strange to say, from that dull source she derived her historic inspiration, and was perhaps the first young girl who ever perused it without compulsion." Jane Margaret added that: "Plutarch's 'Lives' gave her great delight, and perhaps turned her thoughts afterward to the composition of biographical history."⁷²

When their gout-ridden father worked in Norwich, his older daughters joined him. There they could read novels and poetry that were available at the local lending libraries. While still young, the Strickland daughters began their literary careers by writing poetry and more than sixty books for children.⁷³

A frequent summer visitor at Reydon Hall, the engraver Thomas Cheesman (1760-ca. 1834), who was an elderly cousin of Thomas Strickland, taught Agnes Strickland enough Italian for her to translate Petrarch, Tasso, and sonnets of Vittoria Colonna, marchesa di Pescara.⁷⁴ Cheesman made miniature engravings of three of the young Strickland sisters, Agnes, Sarah, and Susanna. For the life of Katherine of Aragon, Eliza eventually learned Spanish.⁷⁵ Without convincing detail, there is a report that Eliza also learned to read German.⁷⁶

Making Money as Writers

The Strickland sisters earned a little money by writing children's books and contributing to glossy gift-book annuals, literary miscellanies, which became popular in the 1820s.⁷⁷ Before turning to biographical history, Agnes Strickland tried without success to make a living in a variety of other genres, including children's books, poetry, novels, and even a play. In May

1835 the actor and theatrical manager William Macready wrote with frustration in his diary, "Read three acts of Miss Agnes Strickland's play: how much time I am forced to expend in this kind of unprofitable labour."⁷⁸ Earlier she wrote her last long poem, *Demetrius*, about a Greek patriot trying to overthrow Turkish rule. The poem was not published until 1833. Critics did not like it, and Agnes lost money on its publication.⁷⁹ She also wrote a full-length book of fiction, *The Pilgrims of Walsingham*, in imitation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Published in 1835, sales from her book eventually only covered printing costs. In 1837-39 she co-edited with the Quaker poet Bernard Barton *Fisher's Juvenile Scrap-Book* and wrote two stories published in 1841 in the *Pic-nic Papers*, edited by Charles Dickens.

In the 1830s Eliza lived in London as a journalist. By 1830 she wrote for the *Court Journal* and sometimes is reported to have become its editor. The *Court Journal*, which was owned by the publisher Henry Colburn, covered court and society news, fashion, and cultural events.

Church and Dissent

The Strickland family worshipped at a local Anglican church, but in April 1830 Susanna left the Church of England. After a period of religious struggle in which she had associated herself with the evangelical members of the Established Church, she signed the membership book of the local Congregational chapel, most of whose members were farmers.⁸⁰ Class conscious, her family was upset. Catherine Parr said that Susanna's leaving the Church of England to join a Dissenting congregation "was very distasteful to our mother and sisters, and for a while, was the cause of disunion and a withdrawal of the old harmony and confidence which had hitherto existed in the family."⁸¹ In her family, "staunch adherents of the English Church, . . . to enter that of a nonconformist was regarded . . . as bordering on heresy."⁸²

Agnes did not regard Evangelicals in her own Church as much better than Dissenters. Writing to the Moodies, she complained that Evangelicals had mistreated her historical publications. She referred to "frocked dissenters in our own church," reviews in "low church periodicals," and a "low church parson."⁸³

Another sister Sarah also became a Dissenter but quietly unlike the outspoken Susanna. Sarah's first husband was a Congregationalist. Her second husband was a Church of England priest and canon.

Susanna always spoke her mind and loudly. One of her close friends said that her utterances were those of "a mad woman and a fanatic."⁸⁴ In another sign of independence, Susanna actively supported the anti-slavery movement in England at a time when slavery still existed in the British Empire. She transcribed the stories of two illiterate enslaved persons, *The History of Mary Prince* and the *Narrative of Ashton Warner*, both published in 1831.⁸⁵

Memories and Letters

What we know about the early life of the Stricklands at Reydon Hall and elsewhere relies mostly on the memories of two sisters who in their old age wrote what they remembered. A biography of Agnes was written by her sister Jane Margaret Strickland (1800-88) and published a year before Jane Margaret's death. She included many letters and excerpts from journals. A less known account of the Strickland family in its early years was written in Canada by a younger sister Catharine Parr Traill (1802-99) who said that she sought to supplement what was in the 1887 biography and not duplicate it. She entitled her memoir "The Stricklands: A Family Chronicle." In 1892 she tried unsuccessfully to get her memoir published.⁸⁶ Parts have appeared in print, usually without acknowledgment.

Much of what is known about the private life of Agnes Strickland and bits of the little known about Eliza Strickland's is found in letters to their Canadian sister Catharine Parr Traill. Agnes' early letters to Catharine were lost as the result of a house fire in August 1857, but Catharine carefully preserved later ones.⁸⁷ After the fire, Agnes sent her a cheque for £20, saying "my poor unlucky Catharine."⁸⁸

CHAPTER THREE

AGNES STRICKLAND (1796-1874)

“Next to the virtue, the fun in this world is what we can least spare.”
(often attributed to Agnes Strickland)

Writing her biography, her sister Jane Margaret Strickland drew a loving portrait of an Agnes who “was really more of the woman than the author. She had a feminine love of dress and female employments, was fond of fine needlework, and did not despise the more useful handicrafts in which the needle is applied, and, till she had a maid, mended her own stockings.”⁸⁹

Jane Margaret said: “No person ever loved or was more beloved by her own sex than the author of the ‘Lives of the Queens of England.’ She shared their feelings, entered into their pursuits, and in their society was always more of a woman than a writer. Her absence alike from assumption [that is, presumption] or pedantry made her society much prized by those who shared it. She was, in consequence, much more popular than professional authors generally are. Her lively conversations, cheerful spirits, and deference for the feelings of others, gave a charm to her manners which set everybody at ease in her company. She made many friends and lost none.”⁹⁰ Jane Margaret talked little about Agnes as a historian, but she saw “pathos [as] Agnes Strickland’s *forte*” in her historical biographies.⁹¹

Possibility of Marriage and Legacies

Although she never married, Agnes considered marriage in the late 1830s. On 11 January 1839 her sister Susanna wrote to her husband to report that “Kate [Catharine Parr] had a letter from Agnes this week, dated Oct. [1838]. They are all well at home. Agnes has backed out from the old man, she says so discreetly that she hopes he will leave her a legacy after all, and she is going to marry a Mr Kirby, sometime during the winter, who is much attached to her and is only 55, is very rich, and promises to make