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## **The Enigma of Mount Holyoke's Nellie Neilson**

**By**

**Gerald Vaughn**

Nellie Neilson (1873-1947), Mount Holyoke College's great scholar of early English history who was the first woman elected a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America (1926) and the first woman elected president of the American Historical Association (1943), remains something of an enigma. The superb quality of her scholarship is quite clear; but the influences upon her intellectual development have been distressingly unclear, as few of her personal papers that might be revealing seem to survive.<sup>1</sup>

What is known is that Neilson studied under Charles McLean Andrews, Frederic W. Maitland, and Sir Paul Vinogradoff. The easy assumption would be that Maitland and Vinogradoff were most influential upon her since they were two of England's leading medievalists, at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford respectively. Andrews, who taught at Bryn Mawr College, The Johns Hopkins University and Yale University, was only briefly a medievalist early in his career, and is remembered far more as an outstanding historian of the colonial America era.

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<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Patricia J. Albright, Mount Holyoke College Archives, and Lorette Treese, Bryn Mawr College Archives, for special research assistance. The Charles McLean Andrews papers in the archives of Yale University Library contain 10 letters from Neilson to Andrews (1927 to 1943), 13 letters from Neilson to Andrews's wife Evangeline (1921 to 1945), and copies of one letter each from Charles and Evangeline (during his illness of 1938) to Neilson. While this correspondence sheds no light on the period of Neilson's graduate study under Andrews, it is illuminating about her later life, career, and lasting friendship with the Andrews family.

An account of Neilson's thought and work examining the instrumental role of Andrews in her career has yet to be seen. This influence upon Neilson was probably more life-transforming than has been realized.

When Neilson received her Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr College in 1899, she became one of only eight American women to receive a doctorate in history before 1900.<sup>2</sup> Andrews was well aware that research into medieval English history was making a quantum leap in the 1890s. He saw the need and opportunity for gifted young medievalist scholars such as Neilson, originally an English major, and helped to mold her into a fine historian.

Many years afterward, in a strong statement of appreciation, Neilson wrote: "I can never be glad enough that at such a time Mr. Andrews turned me from a pleasant dalliance in the paths of early English literature to the strict discipline of early English legal and economic history."<sup>3</sup> She later wrote, upon his passing:

Very fortunate were those of us who worked in the cramped little seminar room at the top of Taylor [Hall]. It was there that I for one found a great love for early English history which has never lessened and has stood me in good stead through the pleasures and tribulations of this mortal life. It is a debt of very great gratitude that I owe to the memory of a great scholar. It was hard, exacting work that he required. One's second best was never good enough, and sometimes neither was one's first best!<sup>4</sup>

Neilson states that "Andrews turned me" from early English literature to the history that became her "great love." Andrews, in a paper

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<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Goggin, "Challenging Sexual Discrimination in the Historical Profession: Women Historians and the American Historical Association, 1890-1940," *American Historical Review* 97(1992), p. 771.

<sup>3</sup> Nellie Neilson, "Introduction" in *Essays in Colonial History Presented to Charles McLean Andrews by his Students* (New Haven, 1931), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Nellie Neilson, "In Memoriam: Charles McLean Andrews," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*, Dec. 1943, p. 7.

published when Neilson was his graduate student, made a sharp and clear distinction between history and literature:

Here lies the first and broadest distinction which can be drawn between the influence of history and literature. In history we are dealing with realities, with the actual relations and struggles of man with man and nation with nation. We are studying life in its best sense, not as it might have been, not as it ought to have been, but as it has been.<sup>5</sup>

He must have imparted to Neilson his belief that the study of history is more valuable than the study of literature:

If these are lessons which history teaches, surely we may ascribe to its study a high place as an aid to moral culture. Much of this literature cannot accomplish, because it does not treat of realities and has not the range of views which history possesses.<sup>6</sup>

Andrews argued:

History alone can furnish that perspective, those points of comparison, which are so needed in judging what we have done and where we now are. It gives a meaning to our present perplexities; it gives proportions to the affairs of today; it makes it possible to determine the character and direction of our present progress.<sup>7</sup>

Andrews knew that history demands scholarship:

...of a high order to discover, understand, coordinate and present the multifarious facts, the ambiguous statements

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<sup>5</sup> Charles M. Andrews, "History as an Aid to Moral Culture," *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the National Educational Association of the Year 1894*, p. 399.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

and contradictory evidences which confront every investigator into the events of the past times. It teaches, in the first place, thoroughness.... It demands a judicious weighing of evidence, a balancing of probabilities, the separation of the true from the false, the probable from the improbable. The historian is not a lawyer defending a brief; he is a judge hearing all the evidence.<sup>8</sup>

To comprehend Andrews's influence upon Neilson's intellectual development, it is important to know Andrews's own training as an historian. At The Johns Hopkins University during the 1880s, Andrews had been trained in the study of the history of institutions. In the last quarter of the 19th century, Johns Hopkins was the center of such training. The program was directed by the noted historian Herbert Baxter Adams who had studied under eminent German scholars including political scientist Johann C. Bluntschii at the University of Heidelberg. Prevailing German thought held history and political science to be primarily comparative institutional and constitutional analysis. Adams sought to instill in his students a desire to trace the evolution of democratic institutions and to search for Teutonic germs in these institutions. Andrews, in his doctoral dissertation "The River Towns of Connecticut: A Study of Wethersfield, Hartford, and Windsor," adopted the former and disputed the latter. Rather than make too much of the Teutonic or any other external historic influence upon local institutions, Andrews inclined more toward a theory that local needs and conditions give rise to local institutions.<sup>9</sup> Throughout his career Andrews made effective use of comparative institutional and constitutional analysis where appropriate, and it was the attitude of the institutional historian that he instilled in Neilson.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 408.

<sup>9</sup> For insights on this emphasis at The Johns Hopkins University while Andrews was a graduate student there, see Jurgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship* (Ithaca, NY, 1965), pp. 99-128; Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *Southern History in the Making: Pioneer Historians of the South* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1964), Chapter 2, "Herbert B. Adams: Southern Historical Scholarship at Johns Hopkins," pp. 52-70; and Lucian Boia, ed., *Great Historians of the Modern Age: An International Dictionary* (Westport, CT, 1991), p. 717.

Knowing that the origins of English civilization and its developing institutions were largely obscure and untold, Andrews felt that American and English historians could help each other to shed light on our common heritage of medieval English history. Soon after completing his doctorate at The Johns Hopkins University in 1889, he personally undertook medieval research which resulted in his book, *The Old English Manor: A Study in English Economic History*, published in 1892.

However, in medieval research Andrews found that training in history was inadequate by itself. The crucial problem was that a multitude of medieval English documents and legal records had been preserved, but the medieval English language was so different from that of modern times that to understand the meaning and usage of terms and place-names was daunting. Texts, terms, and place-names were obscure and could be wrongly interpreted. Historical interpretation of medieval English documents and records requires a reading knowledge of Latin and French and training in philology, paleography, and diplomatics, as well as in history.

There was danger, of course, in ascribing too much power to philology. Andrews noted:

is there not a tendency on the part of philologists to overestimate the indebtedness of history to their own studies?... Too often philological conclusions run exactly counter to historical results....<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, the importance of philology was underscored by Andrews's own research, in which he wisely involved the highly trained and experienced James W. Bright, professor of English philology at The Johns Hopkins University.<sup>11</sup> This strengthened Andrews's work to the extent that, almost forty years after its publication, Neilson described his book as "so admirably written and following so closely the documentary material that it is still very useful to the serious student."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Charles McLean Andrews, "Some Recent Aspects of Institutional Study," *Yale Review* 1(1893), p. 405.

<sup>11</sup> Charles McLean Andrews, *The Old English Manor: A Study in English Economic History* (Baltimore, 1892), p. vii.

<sup>12</sup> Neilson, "Introduction," p. 1.

Andrews most likely hoped for a student of keen intellect who would be trained in philology and history, fascinated by life in England in the Middle Ages, and was motivated to conduct painstaking research and write engagingly about this phase of history. In Nellie Neilson, Andrews had found such a student. At Bryn Mawr, Neilson “found her love of the classics and of English literature and the devotion to early English history which remained constant throughout her life.”<sup>13</sup> By what means did Andrews inspire Neilson, heretofore an English major, to redirect her career path? The answer might be discovered by carefully tracing the evolution of her college studies through completion of her doctoral program.

As an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr, Neilson majored in Greek and English and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1893. She took courses in modern history but nothing in medieval history. However, she took English philological courses in the study of Anglo-Saxon literature and Chaucer.<sup>14</sup>

Neilson was a Bryn Mawr graduate student in English and History in 1893-1894, receiving her Master of Arts degree in 1894. Regarding her master’s work, the following notation (presumably from Andrews as he was the only history professor) appears on her graduate transcript:

During the year Miss Neilson has taken two full courses in History counting for four hours a week. Miss Neilson is an exceedingly faithful and able student, and the excellence of her work has received a deserved recognition by the appointment as Fellow in History for 1894-5.<sup>15</sup>

Holding the American Fellowship of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, Neilson was a graduate student in English and History at Bryn Mawr in 1895-1896. She took the English Seminary, which was taught by professor of English philology James Douglas Bruce and immersed

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<sup>13</sup> Norma Adams, “Nellie Neilson, 1873-1947,” *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* 31 (Feb. 1948), p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Neilson’s undergraduate and graduate transcripts at Bryn Mawr College.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

herself that year in Middle English Romance literature (particularly the great cycles of Arthur, Troy, Alexander, and Charlemagne). She also took history courses. A transcript notation, again, presumably from Andrews, states:

*History of the Community*. A faithful and persistent worker. Has entered with enthusiasm into the work of the course and has been one of my mainstays in all class undertakings. *Historical Seminary*. Has presented the main paper on one evening and has given reviews of several important books. Work always good.<sup>16</sup>

By 1896 the time had arrived for Neilson to conduct her dissertation research. Andrews knew that real scholarship in medieval English history required careful study of both printed and manuscript sources, especially the latter; the course he taught in "Sources of English History" included some paleographical work.<sup>17</sup> He knew the value that Neilson would derive from close association with the sources in England and also with other researchers in medieval English history. Moreover, he wanted her to study under Maitland, of whom he wrote: "My master was Frederick William Maitland more than anyone else...."<sup>18</sup> Andrews met Maitland only twice, but he revered Maitland's historical writing.<sup>19</sup>

Andrews' first Ph.D. student, Eleanor Louisa Lord, whose research was in the industrial history of colonial America studied at the University of Cambridge in 1894-1895. She worked mainly under the direction of English constitutional historian J. R. Tanner, economic historian William Cunningham, and economist Henry Sidgwick. At the same time, she studied with Maitland, of whom she wrote:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Program, Bryn Mawr College, 1895-1896* (Philadelphia, 1895), p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Charles McLean Andrews, draft of a letter to Lawrence Henry Gipson, June 1935, quoted in A. S. Eisenstadt, *Charles McLean Andrews: A Study in American Historical Writing* (New York, 1956), p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> Eisenstadt, *ibid.*, pp. 44-45.



A brief course on the history of English law, although somewhat technical and out of line for me, gave me a coveted opportunity to hear Professor Frederick Maitland of Downing College, one of the high lights of the University and a brilliant, lucid lecturer, who could make even early English law interesting to a layman. I had been provided with a letter of introduction to Professor Maitland, and it was a pleasure to meet him and his wife informally in their home.<sup>20</sup>

In order to complete her doctoral dissertation Neilson traveled to England. She spent the 1896-1897 academic year attending Maitland's famous Domesday Book seminar at Cambridge and doing research in England's British Museum and Public Record Office. She had the good fortune to study under Maitland at the time he was bringing to publication his classic *Domesday Book and Beyond: Three Essays in the Early History of England* (1897). This seminal work is still in print and, while superceded in some respects, remains a highly regarded work on medieval English history. When Neilson studied under Maitland he also was pondering early English concepts of property ownership and corporate unity, and his analysis soon found expression through another seminal work, *Township and Borough* (1898).

Maitland proved to be the correct scholar to direct Neilson to the next level in her scholarship. He was acutely concerned, as Robert Livingston Schuyler indicates, "with the meanings of words, with ambiguities in their meanings, with changes that have come over their meanings in the course of time."<sup>21</sup> For example, the technical meaning of the Norman term, *manerium* (manor), had eluded scholars. Understanding this term was crucial because a correct interpretation of the concept of a manor was essential to understanding medieval English land tenure. Much of Maitland's argument in *Domesday Book and Beyond*, and to some extent in *Township and Borough*, depends on whether manor had a precise and commonly understood meaning in a

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<sup>20</sup> Eleanor L. Lord, *Stars Over the Schoolhouse: The Evolution of a College Dean* (New York, 1938), pp. 97-98.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Livingston Schuyler, *Frederic William Maitland: Historian* (Berkeley, 1960), p. 40.

legal sense, which Maitland thought it did. Other scholars disagreed with Maitland's interpretation of manor, but he became "a pioneer in what might be called historical semantics, a fertile field which has been only slightly cultivated by historians..."<sup>22</sup>

Historical semantics may also be regarded as Neilson's special interest. James R. Cameron has observed:

The British educational system of Maitland's day did not place great emphasis upon what today we should call graduate study; therefore, Maitland's lectures were directed primarily toward undergraduates who were preparing for the Tripos.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, Neilson's study under Maitland was

an inspiring experience which she made vivid to successive generations of students at Mount Holyoke College, bringing to life for them the sense of what a great scholar and teacher contributes to the meaningfulness of human experience.<sup>24</sup>

Neilson's training in both philology and history enabled her to get the most from study under Maitland.

No doubt Neilson also respected Maitland's advocacy for the admission of women as regular students at Cambridge. Cambridge did not grant women degrees until 1948, but in March 1897 Maitland delivered a superb if unavailing address favoring the women's cause.<sup>25</sup>

From Neilson's doctoral research came an article, "Boon-Services on the Estates of Ramsey Abbey," which appeared in the January 1897 issue of *American Historical Review* and made her the first woman to be

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>23</sup> James R. Cameron, *Frederick William Maitland and the History of English Law* (Norman, OK, 1961), p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Hastings and Elisabeth G. Kimball, "Two Distinguished Medievalists-Nellie Neilson and Bertha Putnam," *Journal of British Studies* 18(Spring 1979), p. 144.

<sup>25</sup> Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge* (London, 1975), pp. 132-133.

published in this prestigious journal.<sup>26</sup> Letters from Andrews to John Franklin Jameson, editor of *AHR*, make it clear that Neilson wrote this paper at Andrews's request before she went to England to study under Maitland where she expanded the research for her dissertation. This article was a preliminary presentation of one part of her dissertation. Andrews was favorably impressed by her work and contacted Jameson on her behalf.<sup>27</sup>

In June 1895 Andrews had written Jameson asking him to consider for the new review a short article by Neilson:

She has been working up the organization of the Ramsey manors in the thirteenth century and I told her to complete one small portion ... It is one of the best bits of work of the kind that I have seen and the fullest presentation of *precariae* [boon-services] ever written .... I think that it is worth printing.<sup>28</sup>

In November 1895 Andrews said he wanted "at the same time to encourage Miss Neilson," adding: "I hope to send Miss N. to England next year that she may complete her thesis on the spot under the guidance of such scholars as Maitland, Cunningham and Round."<sup>29</sup>

In October 1896, as the article moved toward publication, Andrews told Jameson that

Miss Neilson is now in England, working under Round's direction upon the Ramsey material. I think that it would be best to send the ms. to the printer at once and the proof to me. It would be unnecessary to send it to

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<sup>26</sup> Nellie Neilson, "Boon-Services on the Estates of Ramsey Abbey," *American Historical Review* 2(1897), 213-224; Goggin, "Challenging Sexual Discrimination in the Historical Profession," p. 796.

<sup>27</sup> See letters from Andrews to Jameson, June 3, July 31, and Nov. 23, 1895, Oct. 16 and Nov. 30, 1896, and Jan. 20, 1897, in Jameson papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>28</sup> Andrews to Jameson, June 3, 1895.

<sup>29</sup> Andrews to Jameson, Nov. 23, 1895.

Miss N. She has made me her literary executor in her absence.<sup>30</sup>

He felt it not presumptuous to rewrite a statement in the manuscript “as Miss N’s way of putting it seemed to me vague.”<sup>31</sup>

Neilson’s dissertation, “Economic Conditions on the Manors of Ramsey Abbey,” was presented to the faculty of Bryn Mawr in 1898, and her Ph.D. was granted in 1899. For her dissertation, Neilson studied both printed and manuscript sources from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries to determine “some of the agrarian and economic conditions existing on a certain group of English manors” controlled by this wealthy Benedictine abbey in Huntingdonshire of central England.<sup>32</sup> Her research was an early example of a close analytical study of a particular estate.<sup>33</sup>

In praise of her finished work, a reviewer commented:

It is just such careful, detailed work as this that is needed to make history an accurate picture of the life of the past. To get right down to the normal every-day conditions of life, so far as they were recorded in documentary form,... to reproduce, to analyze, to interpret those documents, will gradually reconstruct history of a truly scientific kind in one of its most important aspects and during one of the most interesting periods.”<sup>34</sup>

Neilson’s study gave rise, a half-century later, to J. Ambrose Raftis’s own revealing analysis of Ramsey Abbey documents.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Andrews to Jameson, Oct. 16, 1896.

<sup>31</sup> Andrews to Jameson, Nov. 30, 1896.

<sup>32</sup> Nellie Neilson, *Economic Conditions on the Manors of Ramsey Abbey* (Philadelphia, 1899), preface.

<sup>33</sup> R. H. Hilton, “The Content and Sources of English Agrarian History before 1500,” *Agricultural History Review* 3(1955), p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous review in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 15(1900), p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> See J. Ambrose Raftis, *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey: A Study in Economic Growth and Organization* (Toronto, 1957).

Neilson's dissertation was in furtherance of Andrews's research conception:

The starting-point in the economic history of the early and middle ages is the manor, and in consequence, a knowledge of the character and transformation of its constituent parts is essential to an understanding of the progress of agrarian and industrial life.<sup>36</sup>

Research of the 1890s usually was limited to an individual manor. Neilson focused on administration of Ramsey Abbey's Wistowe manor, and she devoted more than a hundred pages in her dissertation appendix to publishing previously unpublished Latin documents of Wistowe (mostly bailiff account rolls).

Yet more importantly, Neilson went beyond the individual manor and examined the group of more than fifty manors (in eight or more counties) connected with the abbey. Her findings justified Andrews's wariness of generalizing about the nature and origins of the English manor. Frederic Seebohm's, *The English Village Community* (1883), had hypothesized that local manors conformed to general patterns throughout England, assuming a continuity between the Roman villa and the Anglo-Saxon village. Andrews, in one of the important contributions of his book, *The Old English Manor*, had closely analyzed Seebohm's hypothesis and concluded that

all the Saxon evidence before the Rectitudines is of little value for Mr. Seebohm's main argument. We look for no singleness of origin nor uniformity of custom in the study of the Saxon manor. Too many influences were at work to make any single system applicable.<sup>37</sup>

Maitland and Vinogradoff went on to further controvert Seebohm's hypothesis.

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<sup>36</sup> Charles McLean Andrews, "The Manor (Historical)," in R. H. Inglis Palgrave, ed., *Dictionary of Political Economy*, Vol. 2 (London, 1896), p. 683.

<sup>37</sup> Andrews, *The Old English Manor*, p. 60.

As an institutional historian, Andrews had insisted

it is highly improbable, that, in the growth of social and political institutions from primitive to historical times, there has been any uniform process by which later results have been attained.<sup>38</sup>

This is not to deny that there was Roman influence upon the nature and origins of the manor, but rather to argue that Roman influence if present was not present everywhere to the same degree. In his doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins and his book on the old English manor, Andrews resisted easy generalization about developing local institutions. So did his pupil Neilson in her own dissertation and subsequent scholarship.

In the years ahead Seebohm relied less exclusively on the Roman influence.<sup>39</sup> Neilson ultimately put exclusivity to rest in her paper “English Manorial Forms” (1929), which was

a plea for the vigorous study of local customs and arrangements, after the fashion set by Professor Stenton and others, and a protest against yielding to a somewhat insidious temptation to cover England too generally with the Seebohm types of manorial organization, types which were common in parts of the midlands and the south, but not necessarily elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

She held that the concept of a manor was general only in its imprecision: “Of attempts to define the manor the safest is Professor Stenton’s, ‘it is impossible’ to define the manor, or Round’s, ‘it is not a technical term’.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> See Andrews’s review of Seebohm’s *The Tribal System in Wales* in *American Historical Review* 1(1895-1896), 120-124, and Neilson’s reviews of *Seebohm’s Tribal Custom in Anglo-Saxon Law* in *American Historical Review* 8(1902-1903), 333-336, and his *Customary Acres and their Historical Importance* in *American Economic Review* 4(1914), 875-877.

<sup>40</sup> Nellie Neilson, “English Manorial Forms,” *American Historical Review* 34 (1928-1929), p. 725.

It is rather a general term for a substantial estate of one lord.”<sup>41</sup> She extended her argument against uniform types of manorial organization in “Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England,” published in the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* (1941).<sup>42</sup>

One of Neilson’s most important findings from the study of Ramsey Abbey was the ample evidence of manorial carrying services (especially carting) to distant towns and cities, which signified the existence of a market economy.

The peasants of Ramsey in the country villages near the abbey carted as far as Huntingdon, St Ives, Cambridge, Burwell, Ipswich, Colchester, London and Canterbury... Markets, urban and rural, were flourishing by the thirteenth century and once a week offered opportunities to the people of the neighbourhood, and it is clear that the better-off peasants as well as the lords had surplus produce for sale and must have relied upon it to pay their rents and money dues.<sup>43</sup>

E. A. Kosminsky writes:

The so-called ‘money economy’ and connections with the market establish themselves on monastic estates at a very early date and continue to play an important part, and yet labour dues are perfectly reconciled and presumably adapted to this development. Ramsey Abbey was careful to maintain the unfixed carrying

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 728.

<sup>42</sup> Nellie Neilson, “Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England,” in J. H. Clapham and Eileen Power, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire, Vol. 1, The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1941), 438-466.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 465; also see Neilson, *Economic Conditions on the Manors of Ramsey Abbey*, pp. 37-39, 80.

services, the chief function of which was to serve its connections with the market.<sup>44</sup>

Even more importantly, Neilson began to investigate the diverse medieval local customs (customary payments by Ramsey Abbey peasants, in this instance). Over the centuries these have exercised a great influence upon the development of English common law, which in turn has influenced American common law.<sup>45</sup> Throughout her entire career and culminating four decades later in her presidential address, “The Early Pattern of the Common Law,” given before the American Historical Association, Neilson constantly delved into the relationship between local custom and common law:

The *consuetudo loci* refers in general to the local custom of particular places. Such custom has always had for me a peculiar fascination, I suppose because it takes one so far back into the past, unknown but imaginable.<sup>46</sup>

In “Custom and the Common Law in Kent,” the first article written by a woman to be published in the *Harvard Law Review*, Neilson earlier demonstrated that “an important approach to the study of the origin of the common law lies through the investigation of regional custom, which is distinctly the concern of economic as well as of legal history...”<sup>47</sup>

In her dissertation Neilson acknowledges Maitland, J. H. Round, and Hubert Hall “for their generous assistance to me in England...”<sup>48</sup> While she mentions Maitland first, we should remember Andrews’s comment to Jameson that Neilson actually worked on the Ramsey material under the direction of Round, who never held a faculty post but

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<sup>44</sup> E. A. Kosminsky, “Services and Money Rents in the Thirteenth Century,” *Economic History Review* 5(1934-1935), p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Neilson, *Economic Conditions on the Manors of Ramsey Abbey*, pp. 49-60, 70-72.

<sup>46</sup> Nellie Neilson, “The Early Pattern of the Common Law,” *American Historical Review* 49(1944), p. 202.

<sup>47</sup> Nellie Neilson, “Custom and the Common Law in Kent,” 38(1924-1925), p. 482.

<sup>48</sup> Neilson, *Economic Conditions on the Manors of Ramsey Abbey*, preface.



was a leading scholar and an expert in the use of charters and other medieval records.<sup>49</sup> Until Maitland's *Domesday Book and Beyond* was published in 1897, Round's *Feudal England* (1895) was the most authoritative work on the Domesday Book. Andrews highly respected Round's work and, in writing a review of *Feudal England*, opined that Round's series of studies on the Domesday Book "rank Mr. Round as among the first, if not the first, of living Domesday scholars."<sup>50</sup> Sir Frank Stenton some years later stated: "Few scholars in England have ever dominated a whole field of scholarship as Round, in the years of his full power, dominated all inquiry which centred upon the problems of early feudal society."<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, Round's fame was diminished by his acerbic criticism of his peers, including Maitland and Hall. This may explain why Neilson, in her subsequent writings, does not call attention to the contentious scholar's direction of her dissertation research in England.

Hall, that venerable expert of the Public Record Office, moreover taught paleography, diplomatic, and sources of medieval economic history at the London School of Economics. Many Americans attended Hall's LSE lectures, which began in 1896, and Neilson may have been among them since he was assisting her dissertation research at the time.<sup>52</sup>

When Andrews wrote to Jameson and expressed the hope that Neilson could study under "Cunningham" while in England, he presumably referred to Cambridge economic historian William Cunningham who had recently written *The Growth of English Industry and Commerce* (2nd edition, two volumes, 1890, 1892). Neilson does not mention Cunningham in her acknowledgments. It is difficult to ascertain whether she studied under Cunningham, though it seems likely since Andrews desired it and also economic history was clearly among Neilson's special interests. Andrews's first Ph.D. student Lord studied under Cunningham and recalled:

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<sup>49</sup> Andrews to Jameson, Oct. 16, 1896.

<sup>50</sup> See Andrews's review in *Political Science Quarterly* 10(1895), p. 695.

<sup>51</sup> Sir Frank Stenton, *The First Century of English Feudalism, 1066-1166*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1961), p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Margaret F. Moore, *Two Select Bibliographies of Mediaeval Historical Study* (London, 1912), p. 11.

His lectures in 1894 were little more than a running commentary on his recently published book, *The History* [sic] *of English Industry and Commerce*, and they were literally peripatetic, because he never sat or stood still but paced back and forth in the small lecture room at Trinity, his hands behind his back while in stentorian tones he amplified the chapters of the book.<sup>53</sup>

Assuming Neilson also studied under this able historian and had a similar experience, she probably understood his book better as a result but does not appear to have benefited appreciably otherwise.

While in England, Neilson additionally may have attended lectures by medievalist historian Mary Bateson of Newnham College, which had a cooperative relationship with the University of Cambridge only a mile away. Neilson, while studying at Cambridge, appears to have resided at Newnham College as had Lord before her. Lord had explored various housing alternatives, chose Newnham, and enjoyed a most pleasant year residing there.<sup>54</sup> When the two young ladies were together in 1895-1896 as graduate students in history at Bryn Mawr, and Neilson was planning for her own study and research in England the following year, Lord surely would have recommended Newnham accommodations to her. If Neilson resided at Newnham, she might have heard that Bateson was a popular lecturer. Bateson was also doing research and writing on monastic history, not wholly unrelated to Neilson's dissertation topic.

In her dissertation Neilson most especially acknowledges her

great obligation to Prof. Andrews of Bryn Mawr College, under whose direction my work has been conducted, for his unfailing help and encouragement. I am also indebted to Prof. Andrews for reading the proof sheets.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lord, *Stars Over the Schoolhouse*, p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-120.

<sup>55</sup> Neilson, *Economic Conditions on the Manors of Ramsey Abbey*, preface.

Andrews's interest in Neilson's dissertation was keen, for he was equipped to give more than perfunctory direction, and evidently he did so. Not only did Andrews enable Neilson to study under Maitland, Round, and Hall, but one must recognize that at this time Andrews was one of the leading scholars on the English manorial system as it existed before William the Conqueror.<sup>56</sup> While devoting much of the 1890s to writing his two-volume work, *The Historical Development of Modern Europe, from the Congress of Vienna to the Present Time* (1896/1898), Andrews continued to stay current with the research on early English land systems and, throughout the decade, wrote reviews of major new books by Ashley, Gross, Maitland, Round, Seebohm, Vinogradoff, and other medievalist researchers.<sup>57</sup>

After such a stimulating doctoral experience, the years from 1897 through 1902 must have been exceedingly frustrating for Neilson. As one of the most expertly trained women historians in the United States, published in *American Historical Review*, and well-connected in England, she no doubt yearned to teach at a college or university and pursue her research interests in medieval English history. Instead, from 1897 through 1900 she taught history in Miss Irwin's School of Philadelphia. From 1900 through 1902 she worked as a Reader in English at Bryn Mawr. Resuming her association with Andrews, she took a history course in English feudalism and also participated in the Historical Seminary.

At last Neilson's career opportunity came, in 1902, when she was employed to teach at Mount Holyoke College. Here for the next thirty-

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<sup>56</sup> I. S. Leadam, "Villainage in England," *Political Science Quarterly* 8(1893), p. 676.

<sup>57</sup> During this period the nature and origins of the English manor remained a frequent theme of Andrews's writing, beginning with his article "The Theory of the Village Community," *Papers of the American Historical Association* 5(1891), 45-60. After publication of his book, *The Old English Manor* (1892), he extended his line of thought in "Some Recent Aspects of Institutional Study," *Yale Review* 1(1893), 381-410, and "The Manor (Historical)," in R. H. Inglis Palgrave, ed., *Dictionary of Political Economy*, Vol. 2 (London, 1896), 683-688. For examples of relevant book reviews he wrote, see *Political Science Quarterly* 6(1891), 734-736; *Political Science Quarterly* 7(1892), 340-344; *Political Science Quarterly* 8(1893), 143-144; *Yale Review* 2(1893-1894), 316-320; *Political Science Quarterly* 9(1894), 161-163; *Political Science Quarterly* 10(1895), 693-696; *American Historical Review* 1(1895-1896), 120-124; *Political Science Quarterly* 12(1897), 171-174; *American Historical Review* 3(1897-1898), 130-133; and *Political Science Quarterly* 13(1898), 707-711.

seven years she taught English history. She also headquartered her extensive trans-Atlantic research activities at the College.

If one seeks to measure the depth of Andrews's influence upon Neilson's intellectual development, one must consider the course she regularly taught in English constitutional history at Mount Holyoke. The subject matter of this course was essential to a student's understanding of medieval English history. According to her former student and faculty colleague Norma Adams, it was Neilson's favorite course.<sup>58</sup> The course description from Andrews's two-semester course in "English Constitutional History" at Bryn Mawr read:

The textbooks used in this course are Stubbs' *Select Charters*, Prothero's *Constitutional Documents*, and Gardiner's *Select Documents of the Puritan Revolution*. The lectures alternate with the reading and interpretation of selected charters and constitutional documents. Each student is assigned from time to time topics upon which a report is made to the class.<sup>59</sup>

Compare this to the description of Neilson's course at Mount Holyoke: [first semester, "The History of England to 1307"] "The political and constitutional history of England from the Anglo-Saxon period through the reign of Edward 1. The work consists of lectures, reports from the class on special subjects, and the careful study of the documents contained in Stubbs' *Select Charters* ... [second semester, "The History of England from 1307 to the end of the Tudor Period"] The work consists of lectures alternating with the reading of the constitutional documents printed in the collections of Prothero, Gardiner, and others."<sup>60</sup> Neilson wrote that Andrews "was a great exponent of the value of constitutional history, especially in its relation to economic questions."<sup>61</sup> Neilson relied on the same authorities as did Andrews.

<sup>58</sup> Adams, "Nellie Neilson, 1873-1947," p. 154.

<sup>59</sup> *Program, Bryn Mawr College, 1898* (Philadelphia, 1898), p. 129.

<sup>60</sup> *Catalogue of Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, 1905-1906* (Springfield, MA, 1905), p. 48.

<sup>61</sup> Neilson, "In Memoriam: Charles McLean Andrews," p. 7.

At Mount Holyoke, Neilson was caught up in “the great changes in historical study that were sweeping the country at the end of the last century, in the direction of the study of economic and constitutional history.”<sup>62</sup> Apparently alluding to the influence of Adams upon Andrews at Johns Hopkins, and of Andrews upon her at Bryn Mawr, she observed:

This movement had great strength in Germany and was furthered in part by the young Ph.D.s who came to us from German universities. It became extremely important for the study of history in America. It is best described in the famous words of Stubbs in the introduction to the ‘Constitutional History of England’.... ‘Without some knowledge of constitutional history it is absolutely impossible to do justice to the characters and actors in the great drama; absolutely impossible to understand the origin of parties, the development of principles; the growth of nations in spite of parties and in defiance of principles.’<sup>63</sup>

English constitutional history is not easy to grasp. Unlike the American constitution, the English constitution is not a single written document but is rather a composite of common law, historic charters, acts of Parliament, and unwritten custom, accumulated over the centuries and highly flexible. Nothing can be declared unconstitutional in England.

Through Andrews, Neilson gained great respect for the English constitutional historian William Stubbs, “Stubbsy,” she called him affectionately.<sup>64</sup> She wrote, “it is not often that one field of knowledge can claim within a half century three such mighty and attractive figures as Stubbs, Maitland, and Vinogradoff.”<sup>65</sup> Later she expressed the hope

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<sup>62</sup> Nellie Neilson, “A Generation of History at Mount Holyoke,” *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* 23(May 1939), p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Adams, “Nellie Neilson, 1873-1947,” *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Nellie Neilson, review of H. A. L. Fisher’s *Paul Vinogradoff, A Memoir, Speculum* 3(1928), p. 107.

that from her students at Mount Holyoke some scholars “of the stature of Stubbs, Maitland, or Vinogradoff may arise amongst us.”<sup>66</sup>

Neilson’s early training in philology and her grounding in English constitutional history prepared her for eventual training and research with Vinogradoff on medieval English land tenure. In the preface to his book, *English Society in the Eleventh Century: Essays in English Mediaeval History* (1908), Vinogradoff said: “It is to the terminological and institutional side of the inquiry rather than to the statistical and topographical one that my studies have been principally directed.”<sup>67</sup> Neilson spent the academic years 1908-1909 and 1911-1912 attending Vinogradoff’s Oxford seminar in methods of historical research and collaborating in the seminar’s research projects on the history of the manor.

From this endeavor came Neilson’s excellent semi-philological treatise, “Customary Rents” (1910), published in the *Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History*, and edited by Vinogradoff. Neilson was the first woman whose work was published in this series.<sup>68</sup> E. P. Cheyney, in reviewing her work, wrote:

No living student probably is better fitted to compile a glossary of manorial terms such as forms the second paper in this volume than Miss Neilson... we have in this list the first extended, inclusive, and authoritative classification and definition of these terms, and it will be of the greatest service in manorial study.<sup>69</sup>

Neilson’s reputation as an expert in matters of terminology and nomenclature was such that, in the mid-1920s, she was appointed to serve on the American Council of Learned Societies’s Committee on a Dictionary of Late Medieval British Latin, working with colleagues in

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<sup>66</sup> Neilson, “A Generation of History at Mount Holyoke,” p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Vinogradoff, *English Society in the Eleventh Century: Essays in English Mediaeval History* (Oxford, 1908), p. x.

<sup>68</sup> Nellie Neilson, “Customary Rents,” in Paul Vinogradoff, ed., *Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History* (Oxford, 1910).

<sup>69</sup> See Cheyney’s review in *American Historical Review* 16(1910-1911), p. 803.

England, Scotland, and Ireland toward production of “a dictionary of Latin found in British sources between about 1066 and 1600.”<sup>70</sup> Another excellent example of her philological ability is her article “Domesday Survey of Kent” and her translation of “Domesday Monachorum,” published in the *Victoria History of the County of Kent* (1932).<sup>71</sup> Her translation of the latter, a difficult manuscript, while not fully satisfactory, was a notable accomplishment at that time.

Neilson’s collaboration with Vinogradoff also resulted in her chapter on “Rents and Services” in *Survey of the Honour of Denbigh 1334* (1914), as did two volumes that she edited: *A Terrier of Fleet, Lincolnshire, from a Manuscript in the British Museum* (1920) and *The Cartulary and Terrier of the Priory of Bilsington, Kent* (1928).<sup>72</sup> The three studies were published as part of the *British Academy’s Records of the Social and Economic History of England and Wales*.

Neilson and Vinogradoff were associated in research until his death in 1925, and she sent one of her own graduate students, Elisabeth G. Kimball, to study under Vinogradoff shortly before he died.<sup>73</sup> Neilson greatly admired Vinogradoff’s work, beginning with his book *Villainage in England* (1892), and wrote of him,

his encouragement of others and the school of research which he established, can be appreciated best by those who were fortunate enough to be his students, to whom his passing means the loss of a great inspiration.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> James F. Willard, compiler, *Progress of Medieval Studies in the United States of America*, Bulletin No. 3 (Boulder, CO, 1925), pp. 10-11.

<sup>71</sup> See Neilson’s contributions to *Victoria County History, Kent*, Vol. 3 (London, 1932), 177-269 and 437-452.

<sup>72</sup> Nellie Neilson, “Rents and Services,” in Paul Vinogradoff and Frank Morgan, eds., *Survey of the Honour of Denbigh 1334* (London, 1914), pp. liv-lxxiii; Nellie Neilson, ed., *A Terrier of Fleet, Lincolnshire, from a Manuscript in the British Museum* (London, 1920); Nellie Neilson, ed., *The Cartulary and Terrier of the Priory of Bilsington, Kent* (London, 1928).

<sup>73</sup> Elisabeth Guernsey Kimball, *Serjeanty Tenure in Medieval England* (New Haven, 1936), p. ix.

<sup>74</sup> Neilson, review of Fisher’s *Paul Vinogradoff, A Memoir*, p. 108.

Surely Maitland and Vinogradoff had much to do with developing Neilson into a great medievalist historian, Maitland through his inspiration and Vinogradoff through his seminars in methodology. However, her exposure to Maitland was limited to the one academic year; she never had the opportunity to associate with him again as his health was declining and he died in 1906. When she started her lengthier association with Vinogradoff in 1908, she was already 35 years old and her knowledge of how to conduct research in medieval English history was not rudimentary. More than teaching even advanced methodology, Vinogradoff's seminars and research projects over many years may have provided Neilson with opportunities she needed to refine and apply her skills and publish the results.

For building Neilson's foundation as a great historian, it is important to return instead to Andrews who first and foremost gave her a philosophy of history. Andrews's philosophy of history, as stated in the 1890s, was this:

Primarily, history is taught for its own sake as a record of the development of humanity, secondarily, as a necessary accompaniment to the study of political institutions, and finally, as a framework for other forms of research, linguistic, religious, or archaeological. The course is planned to develop in the students a readier historical imagination, a critical sense, and a consciousness of historical growth, rather than to give them a mere outline of general history.<sup>75</sup>

In 1920 Neilson wrote regarding the aims of history instruction at Mount Holyoke:

We have desired that our students should gain a love of the subject of history for its own sake, and the knowledge of the great men, movements, and institutions of history which is essential in any education. We have wished also that they should learn to understand that generalizations regarding the course of society, past or

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<sup>75</sup> *Program, Bryn Mawr College, 1898*, p. 127.



present, to be of value must be based on patient study and the exercise of disciplined judgment.<sup>76</sup>

Neilson wrote the introduction to a book of essays presented to Andrews by his students in 1931. Writing to the students, who like herself, came under Andrews's influence at Bryn Mawr, Johns Hopkins, and Yale, she entreated all to do their part "in helping others in their turn to regard the study of history 'as its own great reward, a thing to be loved and cultivated for its own sake.'"<sup>77</sup>

As Neilson neared retirement, she mused:

It was in this movement towards the study of constitutional and economic history that I had my training at Bryn Mawr and in England. 'I burrowed for historic treasures in dull original research' in the Record Office and the British Museum, like other history students, and I still pursue that underground path, chastened somewhat in my hopes, but still enthusiastic.<sup>78</sup>

Upon Andrews's death she wrote,

I think there are many of us who have been Mr. Andrews' students in times past who feel deep appreciation and gratitude for his willingness to help us see the opportunity history places before us and to estimate our own powers with modesty and perspective.<sup>79</sup>

Neilson always had understood from Andrews that study of the past and present are not mutually exclusive but instead are broadly inclusive. In

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<sup>76</sup> Nellie Neilson, "The Department of History and Political Science: History and Aims of the Department," *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* 4(April 1920), p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Neilson, "Introduction," p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Neilson, "A Generation of History at Mount Holyoke," p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Neilson, "In Memoriam: Charles McLean Andrews," p. 7.

her presidential address before the American Historical Association in 1943, she urged that history be studied

not only for its own sake but also for the growth of political and social ideas whose birth lies hidden in the remote past but whose influence has had an important share in forming present opinion and action resulting therefrom.<sup>80</sup>

Her address, "The Early Pattern of the Common Law," synthesized influential political and social ideas in the development of England's common law. Regarding the broad view of that address, Bryce Lyon wrote:

When Maitland gloomily predicted that the history of England's medieval law would never be written, he did so with good reason. Most of the legal records needed for the task were unedited, many were yet unknown, and few trained historians had turned their energies to relating the common law to the institutional development of medieval England.... Fruitful ideas and new approaches appear in the studies of T. F. T. Plucknett, G. O. Sayles, H. G. Richardson, Doris M. Stenton, S. E. Thorne, W. H. Dunham, Jr. and others, but the broad evaluation and interpretation are found in only a few essays by Plucknett, McIlwain, and Nellie Neilson.<sup>81</sup>

Andrews was immensely proud of Neilson. A few months before he died, he praised her at the 50th reunion dinner of Bryn Mawr's class of 1893, noting that she

once said that I turned her from a pleasant dalliance in the paths of Early English Literature to the strict

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<sup>80</sup> Neilson, "The Early Pattern of the Common Law," pp. 199-200.

<sup>81</sup> Bryce Lyon, "From Hengist and Horsa to Edward of Caernarvon: Recent Writing on English History," in Elizabeth Chapin Furber, ed., *Changing Views on British History* (Cambridge, MA, 1966), p. 30.

discipline of English legal and economic history. She has fully lived up to the expectations of that training, becoming a distinguished scholar -- perhaps the most distinguished even among the men in this country in the field of English economic history.<sup>82</sup>

Charles McLean Andrews had served as acting president of the American Historical Association in 1924 (upon Woodrow Wilson's death) and was elected the association's president in his own right in 1925. Looking back upon the early years of the American Historical Association and his own early years as a historian, Andrews recalled, "These years from 1880 to 1900 were a time of great awakening in the American historical world ... It was a time of exhilaration and almost religious fervor among the younger scholars, who saw new spheres of opportunity opening before them and entered on the quest with the zeal of explorers making new discoveries or of crusaders advancing to new conquests."<sup>83</sup> Of her distinguished mentor, Nellie Neilson observed:

He came to Bryn Mawr fresh from graduate study at the Hopkins and abroad, full of enthusiasm for what was then as now the 'new history,'... and then as now an attempt to reach below the surface of political events for the real life and thought of any age.<sup>84</sup>

This is the ideal that Andrews set before her, which guided her thought and work as a great historian.

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<sup>82</sup> Charles M. Andrews, "Bryn Mawr and the Past," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin*, July 1943, p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> Charles M. Andrews, "These Forty Years," *American Historical Review* 30(1925), pp. 233-234.

<sup>84</sup> Neilson, "Introduction," p. 2.

Wikisimpsons - The Simpsons Wiki. Mount Holyoke is a fictional representation of Mount Holyoke College in Lisa's dream. When Lisa was told by George Plimpton that if she threw the Spellympics, she could get into any of the Seven Sisters colleges she wanted, she had a dream involving the Seven Sisters. Mount Holyoke appeared drunk and holding a glass. She said that Lisa could party with her. Episode "I'm Spelling As Fast As I Can". Mount Holyoke College welcomes applications for our undergraduate program from any qualified student who is female or identifies as a woman. As a pioneer in higher education, Mount Holyoke remains committed to its historic mission of providing access to excellence for academically talented women regardless of socioeconomic background. The College values each student's development, both academically and personally, and recognizes that self-identity may change over time. "Nellie Neilson (in Memoirs of Fellows and Corresponding Fellows of the Mediaeval Academy)". *Speculum*. 25 (3): 417-418. doi:10.1017/s0038713400174597. S2CID 225086820. Scanlon, Jennifer; Cosner, Shaaron (1996). "Neilson, Nellie". *American Women Historians, 1700s-1900s: A Biographical Dictionary*. Greenwood Press. p. 166. ISBN 978-0-313-29664-2. Vaughan, Gerald (2000). "The Enigma of Mount Holyoke's Nellie Neilson". *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*. 28: 186-212. NEILSON, Nellie. Born 5 April 1873, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; died 26 May 1947, South Hadley, Massachusetts. Daughter of William G. and Mary Cunningham Neilson. The first woman to serve as president of the American Historical Association (1943), Nellie Neilson was an outstanding authority on medieval English agrarian economy. Her major concern was the influence of local custom on the development of English common law and on the development of the agrarian economy, especially in Kent. Much of Neilson's work was in the form of scholarly articles. (1929, Oct. 1947). *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* (Feb. 1948). "INZER BYERS." "Neilson, Nellie ." *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*. . Encyclopedia.com.