

I have a new book, a biography of a late eighteenth-early nineteenth century woman in Sweden, Märta Helena Reenstierna. Swedish historian Kristina Ekero Eriksson used Märta Helena's diaries extensively in writing the account of this remarkable woman's life. Her journals themselves were one of the most unusual avocations for a woman of her time and place, and she wrote in these diaries nearly every day for over fifty years. There is much to contemplate about her life, and the author has added little nuggets of additional information that have also piqued my interest.

Even much later, perhaps into the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, it was common for young women in Sweden to have a supply of handwoven linens, rugs, etc. ready when they married. In our own linen storage we have two beautiful linen dish towels, unused, that a relative gave to us. She had acquired the goods that her husband's aunt had woven as a girl. The woman had never married, and the linens lay in a chest, unused, for over half a century.

I thought about this when I began to read Eriksson's biography of Märta Helena Reenstierna. In the second chapter of the book, the author quoted a poem from a book published in 1750 that listed the things a young woman needed to know. There was nothing, of course, about navigating one's way through Facebook, not a word about texting a friend, nothing at all about fast food, driving an automobile, or purchasing food and clothing on line. No, the poor young women were blissfully unaware of the necessity for learning these skills. Instead, this is a list of what the well-prepared, properly educated young woman should have learned: to brew, to bake, to brown malted grain, to dye wool, to do laundry, to be familiar with the workings of a stove, to do nothing without a reason. Also, to make jam, to salt meat, to simmer, to fry, to spin, to wind yarn, to break flax for spinning, to sew—and, instead of playing—to set herself to useful tasks. She should also learn to darn socks, to weave, to knit, to repair clothes, to be able to do math and to write with good penmanship. She needed to take care of all household matters, and even to watch the barrels and kegs, to tighten the bands if they became loose. If items rusted, she needed to be able to clean them, and she must water plants that began to dry. All these things needed to be learned and done at the right time.

It is doubtful if most girls and young women, even in 1750, were handy at all of these tasks. Probably, some of them were accomplished at very few of these jobs. Still, running a household was not an occupation to be taken lightly, and in most homes, both boys and girls were given instruction in those activities that were necessary for a comfortable and well-run home.

While most of us have no desire to go back to the conditions of 1750, it is interesting to picture young women from both groups being on their own with only what Nature has provided. Who would be more likely to survive?

Märta Helena Reenstierna lived a life of tragedy and hardship, though she was an "upper class" woman who was responsible for a large household and estate. Yet, she never faltered, continuing to do what she was both taught and required to do, not only for her own survival, but because it was the norm for life in that time and place. Reading this book is causing me to both

appreciate the ease of some aspects of life today and to question and, in fact, be very critical of the superficiality of the culture of the country and the times in which we live.