Foreword

At first sight female cross-dressing, the subject of this book, may appear to be somewhat marginal, one of the byways of history. Appearances, however, are often misleading. The study of belief in the curative power of the 'royal touch', published in 1923 by the great French historian Marc Bloch, was dismissed by an English colleague as 'this curious bypath of yours'. All the same, this bypath turned out to be a main road leading to a new kind of history, the history of mentalities. In a similar way, this new book by Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol has its place in the development of a new kind of social history, a development which is taking place in a number of centres which include Paris and Princeton, Cambridge and Bologna, the Max Planck Institute at Göttingen and the Department of Social History in the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, to which the two authors of this book belong.

Social history is not exactly a new subject: the 'history of society' was already being written in the eighteenth century in France, Scotland, Italy, the Netherlands and elsewhere. It has, however, taken a new turn in the last fifteen or twenty years. Social historians have become concerned with the view 'from below'.as well as from above, and with the history of women as well as men. Rudolf Dekker, for example, has published a book about riots and revolts in Dutch towns, while Lotte van de Pol has been working on the history of prostitution in Amsterdam. In this study, the list of 119 'women living as men' in the Netherlands between 1550 and 1839 is a fascinating piece of historical detection in itself, and it is to be hoped that historians of other countries where women joined the army or the navy (For example, England, Russia and Brazil) will be inspired to emulate it. As for the authors' psychological and social interpretations of the phenomenon, they should appeal to anyone interested in the everyday life of ordinary women – and men – in Europe before the French and Industrial Revolutions. In the course of their investigation, the authors throw a good deal of light on the history of poverty, the history of crime, and the history of sexuality.

Another significant change in the social history written in the

last fifteen or twenty years – for example, by Natalie Davis, by Carlo Ginzburg, by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, by Keith Thomas, by Edward Thompson – is its 'anthropological turn'. Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol have not described their book as a study in 'historical anthropology', but they have drawn on recent work by anthropologists on cross-dressing in Asian, African and American societies, the better to understand the European tradition. Their study also addresses a question which is of increasing concern to anthropologists, sociologists and historians alike; the question of identity. A generation ago, the emphasis was on so-called 'objective' factors; the description of social structure, the measurement of social trends, the analysis of social functions. Nowadays, in contrast, the stress falls on the different ways in which people perceive and interpret their own society, and in the process 'construct' the social reality in which they live. Perceptions of self and perceptions of the 'other', against whom the self is defined, have become central to anthropological, sociological and historical studies. There is, for example, great interest in 'ethnicity' and in the process of creating national identity.

Gender, however, like social class, is only just beginning to be studied in this way, so that Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol are carrying out the work of pioneers. Their investigation into women who dressed as men and joined the army or navy takes them into the world of ballads and folktales (not to mention hagiography), and raises fascinating questions about the interaction between social 'reality' and literature (or myth). The authors make good use of the autobiographies of a few of their heroines, from the vivid and moving self-portrait of Maria van Antwerpen to the account of 'Hendrik van de Berg', on the border between autobiography and fiction as well as between male and female roles, neither one thing nor the other. This study of 119 cases of women who broke some of the most fundamental unwritten rules of their culture, tells us something important about the nature of that culture and also about the process by which each one of us constructs a social identity.

PETER BURKE