

WRITING AND SOURCES XIV: SUSAN RODWAY TO ROBERT  
RODWAY, c NOVEMBER 1643

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*By Dr Patrick Little*

The experience of women during the civil wars is often hard to recover. Apart from the few notorious female soldiers (who dressed as men), the women who laboured to build the defences of London or Gloucester, or the handful of aristocratic ladies who defended their own houses, women were expected to stay at home and look after their families (and often businesses) while the menfolk went to war. Furthermore, fewer women than men were literate. As Margaret Spufford puts it, 'there is... absolutely no way of knowing how many women below the level of gentry in England learned to read. There are some very suggestive individual examples, though insight into the lives of relatively poor women is even rarer than into the lives of day-labourers'.<sup>1</sup> Reading was one thing, writing was another. The reality was that very few women below the gentry level could write. This makes the survival of a letter from the wife of a London artisan worthy of note.

Susan Rodway's background is entirely obscure, but she was probably the daughter of a small tradesman or artisan, of the same class as her husband, Robert, who was probably a tallow chandler. A parallel might be found with Grace, the wife of the London citizen and wood turner, Nehemiah Wallington, who could also read and write.<sup>2</sup> Just as we know of Grace Wallington only because of the chance survival of her husband's notebooks, so Susan Rodway emerges from the shadows only because her letter happened to be published. In 1643 Robert Rodway was an ordinary soldier in the Red Regiment of the London Trained Bands in Sir William Waller's army. He served with Waller in Hampshire, and was present at the failed attempt to take Basing House in November of the same year. His wife was naturally worried about him, and so sent a letter by the Hampshire carrier. This was then intercepted by royalists, and published by the Oxford newsbook, *Mercurius Aulicus*, at the end of December. The newsbook writer – knowing that his publications were read in London – was eager to use such material to suggest that parliamentarian morale was low. As he commented, 'If I thought Mistress Susan would suffer the least by publishing her letter, it should never have seen light, but I conceive 'tis worth noting that the Citie of London (being awed by a Garrison of insolent Rebels) can produce such women, who by honest meanes (kinde commendations and loving epistles) would withdraw their husbands from actual Rebellion'.<sup>3</sup>

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Susan was but a pawn in a larger game of propaganda, and her embarrassment was a necessary by-product of this, although *Mercurius Aulicus* could not resist a sarcastic comment on the standard of her written English: her letter 'is worth your reading if it be but for the English, which here is printed without the least alteration (even of spelling) from the Originall'.<sup>4</sup> One might add that Susan Rodway's spelling is no less atrocious than that of the daughter of a wealthy London furrier and leather-dresser, Elizabeth Bourchier, better known as Elizabeth Cromwell.<sup>5</sup>

Susan Rodway's letter has long been known to historians, who have heightened its poignancy by speculating that her husband was almost certainly dead by the time it was intercepted. Charles Carlton, who tried and failed to find further evidence of Robert Rodway in the London archives, speculated that 'almost certainly she waited in vain. Robert's company took very heavy casualties [in the attack on Basing], and Susan learned all too well the lesson that is so oft forgot – that men go to war to kill and be killed'.<sup>6</sup> This is dramatic stuff, but it is almost certainly too pessimistic. On 29 September 1652, when one Giles Rodway, tallow chandler of Fetter Lane in the parish of St Dunstan in the West, drew up his will, he named as overseer his 'loving brother Robert Rodway, citizen and tallow chandler of London'.<sup>7</sup> This same Robert Rodway had been a master of the tallow chandlers' company since the summer of 1646, if not before, and between then and October 1668 he was responsible for at least seven different apprentices.<sup>8</sup> It is probable that this Robert Rodway was the husband of Susan. If this identification is correct, it seems likely that, rather than joining the dead before the Great Barn at Basing, Robert was among those restless Londoners who cried 'home, home!' in the days after the failed siege. Their reluctance to fight so far from home apparently needed no prompting from the 'kinde commendations and loving epistles' of their long-suffering wives.

*Mercurius Aulicus*, 52<sup>nd</sup> week (30 Dec. 1643), pp. 745-6 (BL, TT E. 81(19)).<sup>9</sup>

Most deare and loving husband my king love  
Remember unto you hoping that you are good helth as I ame at the  
writing heareof. my little Willie have bene sicke this forknight. I  
pray you to cum whome ife youe cane cum saffly. I doo marful  
that I cannot here from you ass well other naybores doo. I doo  
desiere to heer from youe as soone as youe cane. I pray youe to  
send mee word when youe doo thence youe shalt returne. you doe

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not consider I ame a lone woeman. I thought you would never  
have leave me thuse long togeder. So I rest evere praying for yowe  
saveise returine.

To my very loving husbane  
Robbard Rodway a Trainee-  
Soudare in the Red Reggiment  
Under the command of  
Captaine Warrin deliver this  
With spide I pray youe.

Your loving wife  
Susan Rodway,  
ever praying for  
you tell deth  
I depart.

- <sup>1</sup> Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 35.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's World: a Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (1985), pp. 83-5.
- <sup>3</sup> *Mercurius Aulicus*, 52nd week (30 Dec. 1643), p. 746.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 744 (recte 745).
- <sup>5</sup> See W.C. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols., Harvard, 1937-47), ii. 375.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: the Experience of the English Civil Wars, 1638-1651* (1992), pp. 201, 229, 339; see also Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* (1985), p. 194; John Adair, *By the Sword Divided* (1983), p. 118.
- <sup>7</sup> PROB11/231.
- <sup>8</sup> Cliff Webb (ed.), *London Livery Company Apprenticeship Registers, volume 39: Tallow Chandlers' Company, 1633-1800* (Society of Genealogists, 2003), pp. 26, 54, 58, 60, 76, 87, 106.
- <sup>9</sup> The spelling, punctuation and format is the same as that published in the newsbook. Much of the spelling is phonetic, with a few eccentricities (forknight = fortnight, saffly = safely, marful = marvel, and naybores = neighbours, etc).