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# *“Women’s History? – Do They Have Any?”*

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Rhoda R. Gilman

THIS QUESTION, put to me recently by a male colleague over a steaming cup of coffee, was softened by a good-humored grin. Still, it reminded me once more that baby hasn’t come all that far.

The notion that there is something faintly improper about including the details of domestic life in the historical record has long since been abandoned, along with other Victorian attitudes. No longer are the letters of a wife or mother discreetly weeded out and destroyed, as were those of Sarah Steele Sibley and dozens of other pioneer women, before the family papers reached the Historical Society. Modern research in the field of sociology and the vogue for social history in the earlier part of the twentieth century did much to legitimize and dignify the study of family and domestic life. Today archivists are re-examining cataloging procedures and coming to grips with the fact that when historically important papers of women have been preserved they are nearly always concealed under labels such as “John Jones and Family,” or even “John Jones Papers.”

Nevertheless, there is still a widespread idea that women’s history must somehow deal either with the movement for women’s rights during the past 200 years or with the individual careers of women who in one way or another left the domestic sphere and entered the world of public events and therefore of history. This “lives of eminent women” approach includes only a tiny minority of the sex, and it carries the subtle acknowledgment that women have been of historical importance only when they entered the realms usually reserved for men.

With the new surge of interest in women’s history during the past five years, serious scholars have begun to

push beyond these traditional concepts. This was clearly illustrated in the program of a conference on the history of women held last October in St. Paul under the sponsorship of Women Historians of the Midwest (WHOM) and the College of St. Catherine. Among a great variety of topics discussed at twenty-nine separate sessions were the roles of women in social reform, in revolutions, and in antiwar agitation; the changing nature of the female labor force; the typical life cycle of prominent women in the Progressive era; and the roles of immigrant women in family and community among various ethnic groups.

Two papers explored the potential of domestic architecture as a source for women’s history — a topic which illustrates one of the most exciting aspects of the field. From sheer necessity, in the absence of conventional materials, its scholars are learning to draw historical inferences from unusual sources and to mine information in places often passed over by traditional historians. Legal records, for example, are yielding new insights not only into how the law itself has operated but into social customs and economic relationships as well. Two papers in a session on “Law and Lives” discussed the property rights of married women in the South; other papers looked at child custody laws and changing family relationships and at “Women and the New Poor Law.”

As Mary Ryan, one of the keynote speakers, pointed out, many challenges remain. She noted that the great bulk of the conference program dealt with American women of the last hundred years, adding, “We have to extend the social reach of women’s history to include peasant and petty bourgeoisie, to women on the land, in small shops, in clerical positions,” and “if we are to create women’s history that is more than just isolated

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THE EDITOR’S PAGE

historical essays, we have to develop a historiographical scaffold that deals with such questions as, 'What is a definition of women?' and 'How do women make history?' This need for a new theoretical framework was a dominant theme also at the second Berkshire conference on the history of women, held during October, 1974, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There leaders in the field like Gerda Lerner, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Natalie Zemon Davis called for re-examination of basic historical assumptions concerning power, property, and the definition of periods in human development.

IF, as many scholars feel, women's history "came of age" at Cambridge in 1974, then perhaps a new era of widening awareness and expanding research was marked by its move to St. Paul in 1975. The WHOM conference at St. Catherine's was the first such gathering devoted exclusively to women's history (as distinguished from interdisciplinary conferences on women's studies) ever to be held in the Midwest. It drew nearly 600 registrants from twenty-six states and Canada. A broad representation was encouraged in the conference planning, and those attending included emerita professors, full-time faculty members, graduate and undergraduate students, elementary and high school teachers, high school students, and members of the community.

This response leaves no doubt that Minnesota and the Upper Midwest share the nation's growing interest in women's history. There has been still other evidence:

A well-attended session on women's history was part of the program at the Northern Great Plains History Conference held during October, 1974, in Mankato; at the Missouri Valley History Conference in Omaha last March, there were no less than three sessions on different aspects of the subject, plus numerous papers that dealt with women in more specific historical contexts; the spring, 1975, meeting of the Upper Midwest History Conference held in Winona was devoted to a panel on source materials and problems in researching the story of women. So little has been published in the past on Minnesota women that there is still a desperate need even for biographical material. To supply this in part, a book that will include sketches of a number of the state's notable women, as well as chapters on the contributions that Minnesota women have made in several selected fields, is in the process of publication by the Minnesota Historical Society Press. And in observation of International Women's Year, the 1975-76 edition of the *Minnesota Legislative Manual* features an essay on women in the history of the state.

So my skeptical friend may take note that there is indeed such a thing as women's history. On both the academic and popular levels it is currently one of the liveliest areas in the historical field, and as with other "minority" studies, we may hope that it will be the source of fresh approaches to the human story and of new ideas that cut across the frozen lines of accepted thinking.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Norwegian-Americans.* By Arlow W. Andersen.  
(Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1975. 274 p. \$8.95.)

THE YEAR 1975 has been designated as the Norwegian-American sesquicentennial in both the United States and Norway, commemorating the first organized emigration from that country to America in 1825 and the subsequent century of mass migration. Professor Andersen's summary account of this migration and the acculturation of these hundreds of thousands of Norwegians to the American scene, particularly in the Upper Midwest, is both timely and an important contribution to the historical literature of the Norwegian ethnic group in America.

This volume does not represent new or original research, nor does the author pretend it does. Rather, it is a popularly

written, although carefully objective, narrative, drawing on the rather large and impressive body of original sources and monographic studies already gathered and written by specialists in the field, particularly materials published over the past half century by the Norwegian-American Historical Association. The author's synoptic style is crisp, lucid, and eminently readable. He discusses the major aspects of the Norwegian-American society and culture in America during the pioneering period, and during its ethnic heyday, without inundating the reader with too much detail, too many names and dates, or extended analyses and interpretations. In this respect it is a popular work for the interested general reader which is nevertheless built on solid extant source material to which the reader is guided by way of footnotes and a bibliography should he want more detailed information and analysis.



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