

IS CLIO STILL SEXIST?
WOMEN'S HISTORY IN RECENT AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTS

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After a decade of the New Feminism in America, of the emergence of women's history as a viable field of study, and of serious editorial efforts at reform,¹ it is tragic to realize that sexism is still endemic in most of the American history textbooks offered to the college market in the past few years.

Scholars dealing with the problem of sexism in the writing of history define it in terms of the Pauline doctrine of the inferiority of women. In 1971, one scholar characterized sexism as "an ideology of oppression . . . a set of social attitudes based on the fundamental belief in the natural inferiority of women."² In 1972 a group of historians stated that "sexism is basically the belief in the inferiority of women to men . . . history deals with change over time while sexist analyses apply immutable and inherent (as well as unproven) character attributes to women, and then proceed to write history with these attributes in mind."³

One manifestation of sexist attitudes based on this supposed inferiority of women is the tendency of many scholars to continue to see the collective experience of the white American male as the prevailing normative standard for historical investigation. In practice, this means that women's history is still accorded a relatively small amount of coverage in most American history survey texts.

An initial assessment of the amount of space devoted to women's history in a specific text can be determined by a brief and informal content analysis. For example, in The United States 1492-1877 (1972), Harold W. Bradley presents a 409-page survey of the "complicated story" of "our national history" before 1877. An examination of his index reveals five women listed as opposed to 278 men. Four of the women (Dorothea Dix, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton) are covered in the only three paragraphs on women's history in the entire text; Anne Hutchinson is mentioned in passing in an earlier section as "an outspoken housewife in Boston."⁴

In Volume One of Portrait of a Nation (1973), Morton Borden and Otis Graham, Jr. offer a brief 236-page history of the United States to 1865. A tally of the historical figures listed in their index indicates a ratio of twenty women to 280 men. Over one quarter of the twenty women are less than representative of women in American history: one is a former nun who published her scandalous confessions (Maria Monk); one is, in the author's words, a "promiscuous woman" (Peggy Eaton); another is identified only as a "planter's wife" (Mary Chestnut); a fourth is cited as an example of a white woman captured by Indians (Mary Rowlandson); and the Fox Sisters are named as renowned spiritualists. Other women mentioned include Pocahontas and Abigail Adams who is, however, quoted on slavery rather than on women's rights.⁵

In pursuing Borden's and Graham's page references under the general index heading "women," the few nuggets of information regarding women in American history tucked away in this text become visible: colonial women could not vote, women (but not men) could be burned at the stake, farm women aged quickly, women and children were the primary source of labor in the textile mills, white Southern women were publicly venerated, some women authors wrote on domestic topics, and Black women were exploited as mistresses. It is not surprising to learn that of the approximately fifty illustrations in this volume, only two relate to women, one picturing Harriet Tubman and the other a Harper's drawing of a women's rights convention.⁶

To gain perspective, a larger, more recent text was also examined. In Robert Kelley's 1975 The Shaping of the American Past to 1877, a 478-page volume, the index lists thirteen women as opposed to 406 men. The general topic "women" indicates that women prior to 1877 are covered in less than four pages which, by the way, dismiss antebellum feminism as a movement "sapped by failure, apathy, and a new sensation--the Civil War." Out of almost ninety illustrations, four picture women: one presents a portrait of a woman, one a scene from Uncle Tom's Cabin, one a picture of Sojourner Truth, and one a picture of Harriet Tubman.⁷

In 1972, when Karen Gregg published her study of American history in college texts, she rather bitterly concluded that "The message of these texts is obvious: to 'make history,' one ought to be born a male."⁸ Apparently, in 1975 this message has not yet been eliminated nor even seriously revised. Instead, many authors seem to be paying lip service to reform in American history texts by writing in a relatively small number of famous women. Of course, famous women are both identifiable and researchable, and agreed, there is some need for a remedial women's history which will reverse the omission of so-called "notable" women. But unfortunately what results in most cases is a picture of women as a distinguishable, homogeneous group, characterized by a few highly visible case studies of famous women.

In the area of women's history, the famous women, or test cases, are usually suffragists or feminists. As a consequence, an inappropriate amount of the space allotted to women's history is related to suffragism and feminism. As Donald W. Gawronski observes:

It is almost a truism that any reform leader is at least somewhat out of the mainstream of society; for centuries a woman who did anything other than tend to her family and household chores was even more atypical. If it is true that the 'common man' has been neglected in historical writing until the modern era, what must be the case of the 'common woman.'⁹

One only has to scan a standard American history textbook to discover that there is no history of the common woman, and very little history of the Black woman, the Indian woman, the Chicano woman, the working woman, the frontier woman, and so on. Clearly, it is easier, as Ray and Victoria Ginger note, "to work with published polemics than to begin the enormous task of ferreting out the everyday lives of the anonymous."¹⁰ But this continuing stress on famous women impairs historical insight and interpretation. Aileen Kraditor maintains that the biographical approach "manifests a concentration of attention on and interest in the personal motivations of leading participants in the movement and a corresponding slighting of the objective historical significance of the movement in the mainstream of American history."¹¹ This is not to say that biography is invalid, but rather that over-reliance on it supports the idea that women as a group can be dismissed with a brief survey of selected sample women.

Since it is primarily the suffragists who become symbolic of women in American history, it is extremely discouraging to discover that they are usually presented in a traditional and stereotyped manner. In the 1975 edition of Thomas A. Bailey's renowned American Pageant, the section on antebellum woman suffrage is titled "Petticoats in Revolt." Here Bailey refers to American women as "the gentler sex" and to the first suffragists as "a belligerent bevy of female agitators," "fiery females," and "fighting feminists." The section is illustrated by one small picture of Susan B. Anthony and one large cartoon of American feminists.¹²

Similarly, A History of the American People (1975), by Norman A. Graebner, Gilbert C. Fite, and Philip L. White, subtitles its section on woman suffrage "The Suffragettes," states that woman suffrage groups began after the Civil War, and neglects any coverage of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association. The illustrations for the section are composed of a suffragist dirigible, tugboat, and terpsichorean pageant, an "anti" storefront display, and about a dozen portraits of suffragist women, of whom only three are identified.¹³

Part of the reason that suffragism and feminism receive such inordinate (and often inaccurate) attention stems from the fact that women customarily are dealt with in "feminine" terms, as wives and mothers, or in "masculine" terms, as political beings. As wives and mothers, women become virtually invisible in a male-oriented history; as political beings they are most visible as suffragists. One group of commentators is convinced that "the general lack of attention accorded to women outside the women's rights movement reflects the implicit assumption that it is only when women are behaving in ways usually attributed to men--that is, politically--that they deserve mention."¹⁴

As a result, even the texts that are attempting to incorporate women's history continue to fall into the trap of over-emphasizing suffragism. In Carl Degler et al, The Democratic Experience (1973), there is an admirable effort to present some history of women, yet the material is still organized around the issues of women's rights and women's suffrage.¹⁵ James Neal Primm, who states in his preface to The American Experience (1972), that he "emphasized the deeds and aspirations of and the discrimination against blacks, women, and Indians," also resorts to women's rights as the primary focus.¹⁶ And one of the few women to write a general American history text, Rebecca Brooks Gruver, presents most of her material on women in a three-page section titled "Women's Rights."¹⁷

Another interesting byproduct of the stress on suffragism and feminism is the significant dates mentioned in relation to women in American history. The years 1848 and 1920 immediately come to mind. Both relate to suffragism, involve a proportionately small number of women, and had little effect on the overall position of women in American society. These dates have been assigned importance because they mark a bid for power on the part of women. Since male-oriented history not only values power, but regards those who hold power as the raw material of history, dates associated with power automatically assume great historical significance.

Although this concentration on suffragism and feminism is a common pattern, it must be noted that not all historians interpret these phenomena as even having political importance. Some scholars categorize suffragism and feminism as social (rather than political) history. Therefore, they deal with these topics under the rubric of reform movements, an area where women activists have long been accepted and have even been dominant. Lloyd C. Gardner and William L. O'Neill, for example, in their 1974 edition of Looking Backward: A Reintroduction to American History, cover antebellum feminism in two brief paragraphs under the sub-title "Reform Movements." In their judgment, it "did not amount to much."¹⁸ In Allen Weinstein's and R. Jackson Wilson's 1974 Freedom and Crisis the same topic is given six paragraphs in the section on "Reform in Ante-Bellum America." According to Weinstein and Wilson, "some progress was made during the pre-Civil War years."¹⁹ And Robert Kelley covers it as "The Woman Question" in a chapter titled "New Ways of Thinking." To him, "the women's rights movement, was a spin-off of the abolition crusade."²⁰

A third group of historians apparently do not see suffragism and feminism as important at all since they virtually ignore these issues in their texts. In his A Short History of the American Nation (1974), John A. Garraty never mentions antebellum feminism. In fact, his only reference to woman suffrage is in relation to World War I: "The women's suffrage movement was stimulated, as was the campaign against alcohol."²¹ In Charles Sellers, Henry May, and Neil R. McMillen, A Synopsis of American History (1974), there are only three brief references to woman suffrage in the entire text and no listing whatsoever of the topic "women" in the index.²²

Whether historians choose to deal with suffragism and feminism as political history, social history, or non-history, one wonders about their position on questions of philosophy, interpretation, and historical judgment. Kelley reflects on some of these issues in his introduction, "The Historian's Task." In part, he says,

. . . the historian tests the evidence he finds, using guidelines that his craft has developed over the generations. It is at this point . . . that he can be 'scientific' in what he is doing. Above all, he is being properly scientific if he is guided by a judicious skepticism.²³ (Underlines mine).

Bradley also refers to the historian as "he" and points out that history might have been different had "men or events intervened. . . ." ²⁴ (Underline mine). In a similar vein, Garraty comments in his preface that "history is certainly worth studying for its own sake, as a record of men's struggles. . . ." ²⁵ (Underline mine).

These statements make it clear that the historian is seen as being male and that history itself is seen as a record of male achievements. But do these views represent reality, or do they represent the way we have traditionally chosen to define reality? In feminist terms, they do not represent reality, but only a sexist view of American history.

Admittedly, the problem of sexism poses a complex dilemma for the historical scholar; if history reflects the society it chronicles then it will reflect the sexist attitudes and practices of that society as well. But if there is to be any progress toward a more balanced history, it is of critical importance that the historian develop the ability to differentiate between the reporting of sexist attitudes and the preservation of them. The continued perpetuation of sexist attitudes is a prime deterrent to the writing of majority history; that is, a history which both fairly considers and is meaningful to a majority of the population in the United States.

Despite the fact that almost all of the historians critiqued in this study happen to be male, I do not intend to argue, as does Linda Gordan, that only a radical feminist perspective on all history will make an analytic women's history possible.²⁶ Rather, I would support Gerda Lerner who maintains that the study of women's history needs a wider framework, "an endeavor that should enlist the best talents of the profession and, hopefully and at long last, not primarily female talent."²⁷ Similarly, Aileen Kraditor agrees that both female and male historians should be involved in women's history because "all historiography requires a capacity for empathy, for seeing the world through the eyes of people who were molded by social experiences different from the historian's own."²⁸

A critical problem in the American history texts considered here does not appear to be the sex of the author, but rather the inadequate and biased

materials available to them. At least one of these texts specifically cited Page Smith's Daughters of the Promised Land as a source. It may therefore be useful to take a closer look at Smith's book, especially since it purports to be women's history.

Smith describes his history of women as an autobiographical work. "It is," Smith writes, "based upon my knowledge of those women to whom this book is dedicated and, above all, on twenty-eight years of married life." Smith goes on to say that if his wife does all the things she does "so marvelously well under the illusion that she enjoys them, tricked by the masculine-dominated culture's notion of her proper role, then, I can only say, we should all be happier in the shadow of such illusions."²⁹

The most polemical section of Smith's book is his chapter titled "The Nature of Women." Here he claims that women rarely make great chefs because "a woman's cooking is personal. She cooks for those she loves and wishes to nurture; her cooking is thus sacramental." At another point he declares that women have "no sense of honor. Honor is a masculine concept which seems simply silly to a woman's practicality . . . women are fearful liars." In certain respects Smith rates women as superior to men: "they are more open, more loyal, more passive or more capable of passivity, more elemental, more passionate." And he finds them to be complementary to men: "Women perform routine tasks better than men . . . The woman is repetitive in order that the man may be innovative."³⁰

Smith's sources are limited, his interpretations biased, and his pseudo-biological determinism rampant. Yet his work manifests, and perpetuates, attitudes which are not atypical: women are basically alike, so if you know a few women you can write the history of all women; as a social group women have an intrinsic nature; and, the white male is the standard for deciding what characteristics women possess in a greater or lesser degree.³¹ More research and less generalization appear to be the remedy to these problems. But given the existence of the basic sexist assumption that women are by inborn (as opposed to inbred) nature different from men and are to be assessed on that perceived difference, the results of the research still will be distorted by bias.

William L. O'Neill's work on women's history is also cited as a source by several of the authors critiqued here. In fact, he is an author of one of the texts surveyed. Yet his work is imbued with sexist attitudes. In Everyone Was Brave he writes, "I have avoided the question of whether or not women ought to have full parity with men. Such a state of affairs obtains nowhere in the modern world, and so, since we do not know what genuine equality would mean in practice, its desirability cannot fairly be assessed."³² In another study, he explains that the domestic structure has to undergo revision in order for women to gain equality but, since this involves great difficulties, "It may be that little can be done along these lines, that woman's dilemma is one of those facts of life that simply have to be endured."³³ Substitute the word "Black" for "women" in O'Neill's assertions, and their fallibility becomes immediately apparent. If they read "I have avoided the question of whether or not Blacks ought to have full parity" or the "Black's dilemma is one of those facts of life that simply have to be endured" they would be unacceptable to the scholarly community.

But O'Neill apparently used criteria unique to women. Another way this is demonstrated is through his concern with a woman's involvement in, or need for, a marital relationship. For example, in O'Neill's terms, the female confidants of Jane Addams were spouse-surrogates.³⁴ It is no more than

conjecture that Addams either needed or saw these women as replacements for a husband. To suggest that James Madison and James Monroe were spouse-surrogates for the widowed Thomas Jefferson or that Martin Van Buren and John Eaton were spouse-surrogates for the bereaved Andrew Jackson would be incomprehensible and perhaps even humorous.

It is also difficult to relate to O'Neill's comments regarding the sexuality of certain feminists. According to him, Charlotte Perkins Gilman "functioned at a low-level of sexual intensity;" one can only wonder how O'Neill arrived at such a value-laden judgment. He then points out that "she was a mother and a heterosexual, unlike some feminists. Thus the degree of her sexual maladjustment was probably less than might have been expected, given her start in life."³⁵ He neither defines her "sexual maladjustment" nor explains why it was germane to his discussion.

In another serious blunder O'Neill characterizes Gloria Steinem as "a writer and probably the most beautiful woman" in the contemporary feminist movement. This is irrelevant to Steinem as a person, as a writer, and as a feminist. But it is an accurate reflection of a culture which measures a woman's significance in relation to her physical appearance. It is in this same tone that O'Neill pejoratively describes Anna Howard Shaw as "short and fat with a broad, seamed face and a disposition to match," and M. Carey Thomas as "the kind of feminist that was easily caricatured . . . sharp-tongued, ambitious, a confirmed man-hater." But he represents Margaret Dreier Robins as "a large, dark, handsome woman of great tact and presence, [who] challenged the feminist stereotype on every count."³⁶

With sexist attitudes such as these masquerading as women's history, it is easy to sympathize with the authors of general texts, such as those criticized here, who must deal with literally hundreds of sub-fields within the area of American history. On the other hand, it also raises one's appreciation for a text which does present a reasonably aware, non-sexist view of women's history.

In We The People: A History of the United States (1975). James I. Clark and Robert V. Remini have begun to move in this direction by devoting four relatively large sections of the volume to women's history. In the section on colonial women they argue that "women were not put in the 'place' to which men consigned their nineteenth-century descendants . . . but were partners with their husbands, sharing work and problems and the task of rearing children." A later section, titled "Women Are Created Equal, Too," observes that women made some headway in gaining civil rights before the Civil War. When Remini and Clark consider the Progressive Era they make the remarkable statement that "there was . . . much more to feminism than just the suffrage." And after five pages on the topic of modern women, they state that the gains of contemporary feminism "could only be salutary for any country." The index, the illustrations, and the other sections of the Remini and Clark book reflect the presence as well as the meaning of women in the growth of the American nation.³⁷

Particularly in light of the other texts considered here, Remini and Clark demonstrate that non-sexist history is a real possibility. Another favorable sign for the future development of women's history in survey texts is the number of specialized volumes currently being published by women's historians. Hopefully these works will supplant the Smith/O'Neill genre of women's history, thus making available more hard content and more balanced interpretations to authors of American history texts.³⁸

Progress towards non-sexist texts might further be accelerated by an awareness of guidelines regarding non-sexist practices in both history books and history classrooms. The impression that the male experience in America is equivalent to the American experience can be offset by stylistic reforms such as the use of inclusive personal pronouns. Consider, for example, the assertion that "the pioneer utilized his environment" as opposed to "the pioneers utilized their environment." Or, reflect on the mental picture evoked by "a Senator serves his constituency" as opposed to "a Senator serves his or her constituency." Moreover, serious question has been aimed at the use of generic terms, particularly "man," to refer to people. Historians who pride themselves on accuracy still make statements such as "man moves into the twentieth century" when they actually mean people, persons, human beings, or perhaps Americans.

Consistency in word usage is another area which demands closer scrutiny. If an historian refers to "Ms. Adams," then he or she should pursue parallel construction by referring to "Mr. Adams;" if "Abigail Adams" is used, then "John Adams" would be consistent; if "Abigail" is preferable, then "John" is consistent. By setting women off with titles such as Mrs. or Miss, the historian provides irrelevant demographic data that is not supplied for men. Furthermore, the use of titles for women and not for men subtly implies that women are in a different category of people, while the practice of calling only women by first names subtly implies that women are in a lesser category of people.

Other stylistic suggestions include parallel construction in sex-linked terms (men and women rather than men and girls), accurate terms (children are well-nurtured rather than well-mothered), and correct usage of historical terms (suffragist rather than suffragette). All illustrations, artwork, and captions should definitely be included as valid subjects for application of these guidelines.

In addition to stylistic reform, there are possibilities for change in the treatment of substantive materials as well. Omission of women can be remedied by simply extending efforts to include more female historical figures. The perpetuation of sex-typing can be lessened by careful use of examples, such as Belva Lockwood as a lawyer or Walt Whitman as a Civil War nurse. Generalizations from one sex to the other can be avoided: why state that Americans are competitive and aggressive when in fact an opposite value system has traditionally been imposed on American women?

In terms of methodology, authors and teachers can attempt to include the works of men and women in their review of historical literature and citations. An author or teacher might also include some feminist critique of the historical events under consideration; it is not necessary that he or she agrees with such critique, but only that he or she acknowledges its existence.

In their 1975 report to the American Psychological Association, the Task Force on Issues of Sexual Bias argued that sexist practices should be abandoned because "by ignoring such conditions, the status quo is perpetuated, whereas responsible attention by psychologists to the style and content of their writing allows the profession to play an active part in creating human equality."³⁹ In defining their roles and functions in the contemporary world, many historians may also relate to this thought as a worthwhile goal for the realm of historical theory and practice.

NOTES

¹Several publishers (such as McGraw Hill) have indicated in private correspondence that they have employed women's history consultants for the women's history sections of survey texts. From the problems extant in 1975, however, it appears that the investment of more time and money, or perhaps the recruitment of more qualified consultants are essential to the success of such consultation programs.

²Ruth Rosen, "Sexism in History or, Writing Women's History Is a Tricky Business," Journal of Marriage and Family, XXXIII (August, 1971), 541.

³Linda Gordan et al, "A Review of Sexism in American Historical Writing," Women's Studies, I (1972), 134.

⁴Harold Whitman Bradley, The United States, 1492-1877 (New York, 1972), xii, 320-21, 17. The illustrations in this text were not relevant in a consideration of bias since they were entirely composed of maps.

⁵Morton Borden and Otis L. Graham, Jr., Portrait of a Nation: A History of the United States, Volume I (Boston, 1973), 195, 163, 96, 26, 197, 6, 92.

⁶Ibid., 18, 29, 37, 177, 229, 202, 96.

⁷Robert Kelley, The Shaping of the American Past, Volume I (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1975), 234-237.

⁸Karen Gregg, "American Women in College History Texts: A Content Analysis," Illinois Journal of Education, LXIII (March-April, 1972), 10.

⁹Donald V. Gawronski, History: Meaning and Method (Glenview, Ill., 1975), 94-95.

¹⁰Ray and Victoria Ginger, "Feminist and Family History: Some Pitfalls," Labor History, XII (Fall, 1971), 617. Their own text, however, includes almost no women's history. See Ray Ginger (with the assistance of Victoria Ginger), People on the Move--A United States History (Boston, 1975).

¹¹Aileen S. Kraditor, Up From the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism (Chicago, 1970), 5-6.

¹²Thomas A. Bailey, The American Pageant, Fifth Edition, Volume I (Boston, 1975), 366-367.

¹³Norman A. Graebner, Gilbert C. Fite, and Philip L. White, A History of the American People, Second Edition (New York, 1975), 613-617.

¹⁴Ann D. Gordan, Mari Jo Buhle, Nancy E. Schrom, "Women in American Society: An Historical Contribution," Radical America, V (July-August, 1971), 12.

¹⁵Carl N. Degler et al, The Democratic Experience: A Short History, Third Edition, Volume I (Chicago, 1973), 131-133, 199-200.

¹⁶James Neal Primm, The American Experience to 1865 (St. Louis, 1972), preface pages, 191-192.

¹⁷Rebecca Brooks Gruver, An American History (New York, 1972), 458-460.

- 18 Lloyd C. Gardner and William L. O'Neill, Looking Backward: A Reintroduction to American History (New York, 1974), 138.
- 19 Allen Weinstein and R. Jackson Wilson, An American History: Freedom and Crisis, Volume I (New York, 1974), 374.
- 20 Kelley, Shaping of the American Past, Volume I, 234.
- 21 John A. Garraty, A Short History of the American Nation (New York, 1974), 388.
- 22 Charles Sellers, Henry May, and Neil R. McMillen, A Synopsis of American History, Third Edition (Chicago, 1974), 242, 291, 331.
- 23 Kelley, Shaping of the American Past, Volume I, xviii.
- 24 Bradley, The United States 1492-1877, xi.
- 25 Garraty, A Short History of the American Nation, xi.
- 26 Linda Gordan, "Radical Academic Guide: Women and History," Liberation, XV (January, 1971), 46-49.
- 27 Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," Journal of Social History, III (Fall, 1969), 62.
- 28 Aileen S. Krador, "Foreword," v, in Ronald W. Hogeland (ed.), Women and Womanhood in America (Boston, 1973).
- 29 Page Smith, Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History (Boston, 1970), 349-350.
- 30 Ibid., 313, 316-317, 331, 321.
- 31 For a more detailed appraisal of Smith's ideas, see Lois W. Banner, "On Writing Women's History," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, XI (Autumn, 1971), 347-358.
- 32 William L. O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America (Chicago, 1971), viii.
- 33 William L. O'Neill, "Feminism as a Radical Ideology," in Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade (eds.), Our American Sisters (Boston, 1973), 323.
- 34 O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, 118.
- 35 Ibid., 131-132.
- 36 Ibid., 368, 120, 110, 114. This discussion on Smith and O'Neill was excerpted from a paper titled "Sexism in the History of Women in the United States" presented by the author at the Great Lakes Regional History Conference, Grand Rapids, Michigan, May, 1975.
- 37 James I. Clark and Robert V. Remini, We The People (Beverly Hills, Cal., 1975), 80, 83, 268, 270.

³⁸ See for example, Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America: A Brief History (New York, 1974); June Sochen, Herstory (New York, 1974); and Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America (New York, 1975).

³⁹ APA Task Force on Issues of Sexual Bias in Graduate Education, "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language," American Psychologist, XXX (June, 1975), 684. See also Association for Women in Psychology Ad Hoc Committee on Sexist Language, "Help Stamp Out Sexism: Change the Language!" APA Monitor, VI (November, 1975), 16.