

Women in Archives: An Historian's View on the Liberation of Clio

By JOANNA SCHNEIDER ZANGRANDO

LUCY STONE, a leading feminist, addressing a national woman's rights convention in Cincinnati in 1855, declared:

The last speaker alluded to this movement as being that of a few disappointed women. From the first years to which my memory stretches, I have been a disappointed woman. When, with my brothers, I reached forth after the sources of knowledge, I was reproved with "It isn't fit for you; it doesn't belong to women." . . . I was disappointed when I came to seek a profession worthy an immortal being—every employment was closed to me, except those of the teacher, the seamstress, and the housekeeper. In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer. I wish that women, instead of being walking show-cases, instead of begging of their fathers and brothers the latest and gayest new bonnet, would ask of them their rights.¹

Echoes of Lucy Stone's disappointment have persisted for over a century. So, too, have the scorn and derision directed at "disappointed women," couched in questions such as "Who are these women?" and "What do they want?" Among professional historians the question is whether there are enough sources to justify research and teaching efforts devoted only to women. Not much has changed. In 1852 the male editor of the New York *Herald* claimed that woman was and always had been "doomed to subjection; but happier than . . . in any other condition, just because it is the law of her nature."²

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¹ Aileen S. Kraditor, ed. *Up from The Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 71.

² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

In 1970 historian Paige Smith commented that "If she [his wife] does all these things so marvelously well under the illusion that she enjoys them, tricked by the masculine-dominant culture's notion of her proper role, then, I can only say, we should be the happier in the shadow of such illusions."³ Whether explained in terms of the laws of nature or the process of socialization, the end result is the same: women assigned their proper roles by men. This was the source of disappointment felt by Lucy Stone and her sister feminists; this is a main source of disappointment felt by contemporary feminists: not disappointment in *being* a woman, but in being denied opportunities *because* of being a woman.

But whatever the past and present disappointments, they have, of necessity, led to an assessment of the status of women. Nineteenth-century feminists examined the historical antecedents of their dilemma, thereby broadening their understanding of their situation. Contemporary feminists and their allies—whether members of feminist organizations or sister-travelers—are involved in the same type of examination. From this I see only positive repercussions. The study of our past promises to open up alternatives to our present life-styles; history can be used as a way of learning about ourselves and as a means of reconstructing the past into new and revealing interpretations without violating the tenets of historical scholarship. We do not have to falsify evidence from the past; we have only to ask different questions of the data.

For example, why did a young woman in one of her history classes this summer ask why, after taking three semesters of Western Cultural Traditions, she did not learn anything about women in western societies? In this question she expressed both her intellectual and emotional disappointment. Very likely the men who laughed at her question were uncomfortable and disbelieving that anyone would have the audacity to: (1) challenge the alleged facts included in history books, and (2) seriously suggest the inclusion of women among those facts. One has to deal with the pathos of the question, both in personal terms for the student and in historical terms for those who have written histories that exclude women. How does

³ Paige Smith was appointed by the American Historical Association to serve on the ad hoc committee studying the problems of women in the history profession. The quote is from his *Daughters of the Promised Land: Being an Examination of the Strange History of the Female Sex From the Beginning to the Present, with Special Attention to the Women of America, Illustrated by Curious Anecdotes and Quotations by Divers Authors, Ancient and Modern* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1970), pp. 349-50. That is certainly a curious title for a serious book about women, but then Smith claimed to have written his *Daughters of the Promised Land* from "autobiographical knowledge" and not extensive research!

one explain why, in studying the past twenty-five centuries, women are treated only rarely in a serious context? What women are included? Sappho, the Greek poetess (usually with allusions to lesbianism); the Virgin Mary, especially since the cult of the Virgin was reflected in the literary and other artistic works of famous men; Catherine of Sienna; Queen Elizabeth; and Catherine the Great. Additionally, one theme recurs: comment on the bodily contours of women painted by male artists over the centuries. All of which hardly constitutes the definitive role of women in western cultures! Does this not underscore the need to ask new questions?

Opportunities for real learning occur when students and professors try to answer the question of why more women—individually, in groups, parts of larger social movements, affecting and being affected by changes like the industrial revolution—are not included in traditional history. Students recognize that they cannot find information about women in their texts and courses. Women have traditionally been relegated to the domestic sphere, male-defined as not important enough to get into the history books. Unless a woman was particularly erratic, unusual, perhaps neurotic, she did not, in fact, gain a place in our recorded history. Some outstanding women who performed in the male power-arena or some accused of being witches or sexual deviants, of course, have been included. Aside from the exceptional ones, women have generally been treated as a great monolith: in the home, caring for husbands and children, or indulging in philanthropic activities, with no class, ethnic, social, or economic differences noted. In addition, according to the authors of a paper presented at the 1970 annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA), many “sexist” authors distort historical interpretation by applying “immutable and inherent (as well as unproven) character traits to women, and then proceed to write history with these character traits in mind.”⁴

Even the long history of the suffrage movement in the United States from the 1840's until 1920 was more often than not deemed unimportant, or, equally distorted, as all-important to the feminist movement. Samuel Eliot Morison in the 1965 edition to his *Oxford History of the American People* devoted two sentences to the suffrage crusade and the nineteenth amendment under a section entitled “Bootlegging and Other Sports.” Incidentally, he devoted 3 pages to prohibition and the eighteenth amendment! During the panel discussion on “The Case of the Missing Ladies: How College

⁴ Linda Gordon, Persis Hunt, Elizabeth Pleck, Marcia Scott, and Rochelle Ziegler, “Up from the Genitals: Sexism in American Historiography,” unpublished paper presented at AHA annual meeting in Boston, 1970.

Textbooks Got That Way" at the April 1972 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), Earl Schmidt presented revealing statistics based on his survey of standard texts used in history courses in the United States. He found one of the thirty-six texts he surveyed, Morison's *Oxford History*, devoted 20 percent of its coverage of women to scandals and 25 percent to writers, 10 percent to nursing, and 5 percent to flappers—an overall total of 11 pages out of 1,830. The popular Sellers and May American history text focuses 50 percent of its treatment of women to writers and 50 percent to suffrage for a grand total of one-fourth page out of 448 pages. One is momentarily heartened to learn that Harvey Wish devoted 34 pages to women, but that is out of a total of 1,256 pages. I do not mean to play a numbers game, however, because equally important to coverage in quantity is the quality and focus of information included about women in textbooks.⁵

If we want to study about women in western culture or in American history, we have to ask different questions of the past based, in part, on different value systems and motivated, at least partially, by the current disappointment of women themselves. No one ever asks why we study about men, as if they were the only movers and shakers in history. It is assumed that the history of *mankind* is good for all of us. Lilli Hornig (Ph.D. chemist to whom the president of Brown University is married) aptly points out that "when we ask why educate a woman, the implication is that it won't pay off."⁶ So, too, when young men laugh at the suggestion that women be included in their history courses (and when male colleagues ask if there is really enough data about women to justify a whole course) the implication is that it just does not add anything to our knowledge of "*mankind*."⁷

But for those of us who persevere in our search for the missing women in history, the rewards are substantial. Because it asks new questions, the feminist movement, like the black protest movement earlier, has a positive effect on the writing of history. Women are being accorded a new place in the historical literature, and this

⁵ Earl Schmidt presented these statistics as panelist on "The Case of the Missing Ladies: How College Textbooks Got That Way," session at the OAH annual meeting in April 1972. See also Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 899-904.

⁶ Lilli Hornig, quoted in the *Brown Alumni Monthly* (July 1972), p. 12.

⁷ A woman graduate student at a university where I taught defended a proposed women's history course on the grounds that it "represents an admirable and necessary attempt to fill the void of knowledge concerning women. Courses are presently geared to what part *man* has played in his economic, social, and cultural history. . . . [The university] is presently neither meeting the needs of its female students nor is it communicating essential knowledge necessary for a liberal education by excluding this type of information from its curriculum." Personal memo to the author.

change forces a total reassessment of the American experience. Despite some cultural and educational lag, the revised consciousness of women, and men, I am confident, will continue to be reflected in the history we write and teach and for which we acquire sources.

Elsie Freivogel, in her paper in this series, has pointed out some of the myths, misinformation, and social attitudes that underlie patterns of discrimination against women in education, in their work, and in their career expectations. It is incumbent upon those who work in the field of history to correct misinformation, to analyze the bases for our myths concerning women, and to help transform our social attitudes over the long run. This task falls equally on teachers, authors, archivists, manuscript librarians, museum curators—all those engaged in the total process of gathering and sharing information about the past.

How different a view of history one gets if one begins by asking not why women have allegedly accomplished so little, but rather—given the roles assigned them, the difficulties and dangers and responsibilities of childbirth and child care, the household labors they were expected to perform, their lack of a “room of their own”—why they contributed so much to our civilization. And I do not mean a contribution limited to famous women; this is limiting and distorting! A study of society and the psychological and social factors operating against women’s participation, such as Barbara Welter’s “Cult of True Womanhood,”⁸ provides a clue to the aspirations generally expected of most women in the 1820–60 period. It was difficult not to fulfill the expectations of “true womanhood,” to challenge the roles deemed proper for women. The tendency to develop a cult of womanhood, to ascribe to women characteristics of domesticity, purity, piety, and submissiveness and to assign them to the home as their proper sphere reflected society’s need to create and maintain a stable set of values at a time of vast and rapid change. Welter’s essay really tells us much about men: how they viewed women and why it was psychically essential for them to place women on a pedestal. The parallels to the present, in terms of the search for stability in rapidly changing times and the reluctance to accept a liberated woman, are too obvious to detail.

An important aspect of reassessing the past is the need to come to grips with the broader question of why certain groups or types of people have been excluded. This imperative is especially revealing in a society such as ours, which has always given lip-service to being open and all-inclusive. One respondent to a comprehensive ques-

⁸ Barbar Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966): 151–74.

tionnaire sent out by the special women's committee of the American Studies Association pointed out that women were excluded as subject matter from all of his intellectual and social history courses as a student.⁹ His professor rationalized ignoring women's contributions because there was not enough time. Why was there enough time to study certain men? Perhaps there were fewer easily identifiable women leaders, compared with the number of men, but there were many followers in the mass social and reform movements of the nineteenth century. On what basis is the decision made not to study women because it is difficult to find famous ones? And why study only public people, not private or common citizens? These are some of the same types of questions that the radical historians are now asking about the research and teaching of history generally. If professors, on grounds of not having enough time, slight women in their treatment of the past, how can we expect students to go much beyond an initial search through ready documents to come up with information on women or any other group missing from our history books? If the professor does not have time, the implication might well be taken that it is not worth the time!

In addition to serving as the basis for new research and teaching, for asking new questions about old material, women, especially those engaged in women's history in any capacity—teaching, research, archival work—perform another function. We serve, not incidentally, as role models for women students and researchers. You as archivists fulfill this function. Viewing a professional woman archivist at work may provide a career spark or at least suggest an additional use of one's history education.

Another source of models for women in history is the Coordinating Committee of Women in the History Profession (CCWHP) organized in 1969 by women in the American Historical Association. The CCWHP was both a part of, and apart from, a larger counter-tradition of historical inquiry and interpretation apparent at the 1969 AHA meeting. An important challenge was directed by various radical, new-left interpreters of our past to the school of consensus history. To the charge that they and their historical interpretations were consumed and colored by present-mindedness, the radical historians countered that the consensus historians were themselves guilty of that. It was within this charged atmosphere that the CCWHP presented to the AHA business meeting and council a series of reso-

⁹ The results of the questionnaire composed and sent out during the summer of 1970 by the women's committee of the American Studies Association have been edited and expanded into book form by Betty Chmaj. The book is *American Women and American Studies* (Pittsburgh: Know, Inc., 1971).

lutions on women. These same women, not all active feminists, used the occasion to exchange information on research in women's history and courses being taught on the subject. They incorporated, thereby, the "sisterhood," sharing ideals of the feminist movement.

The CCWHP acutely realizes the necessity for primary research, new materials, and expanded courses on women's history to provide a sense of personal identity and historical perspective for women denied entry into the mainstream of our past. Feminists or sympathizers in the history profession view women's studies as a thoroughly scholarly task of research and teaching programs to increase an understanding of women, to underscore the necessity of viewing women's history as a serious subject, and to recreate a past that does not automatically channel women into playboy-defined sex objects or media-created, scatterbrained consumers. Those engaged in women's studies emphasize the need for hard, sustained primary research that moves beyond the anthologies on women and the conceptual framework of "great" or "oppressed" women, as Gerda Lerner and Nancy Schrom suggest.¹⁰ Historians, however they might wish, cannot ignore the new history in which many women historians are involved. It is not a phase that will pass, nor can the profession escape from radical or feminist critiques. Real scholars should not wish this to happen!

It is one thing for women historians like those in the CCWHP to propose courses on women and quite another matter to get those courses introduced on a sustained basis. After all, many college and university administrators view these recommendations as simply reflective of a passing fad. In fact, many administrators go so far as to caution women faculty members not to limit their academic marketability by becoming too closely identified with women's studies. Such advice has the implications of self-fulfilling prophecy if enough women are induced to take it seriously.

Equally important with considerations of identity, group consciousness, and new ways of viewing the past are questions that relate to educational theory and the learning process. Any change in the assessment of the past that will include women more fully will demand new curriculum materials, fresh sources, and innovative methodologies. Courses on women in history have built-in research, methodological, and bibliographical components. We are developing techniques to uncover materials, to use materials effectively and

¹⁰ Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," *Journal of Social History*, 3 (Fall 1969): 53-62; Nancy Schrom, comments made as panelist on "The Case of the Missing Ladies: How College History Textbooks Got That Way" session at the OAH annual meeting in April 1972.

without distortion, and to build a body of resources for others to use. For those trying to uncover the missing women in history, a variety of sources exist, as you are well aware. But they have to be used, perhaps, with some innovation and imagination: letters, journals, health and court records, newspapers, travel accounts, movies, diaries, family histories, autobiographies, magazines, paintings, photographs, tapes, household guides, economic studies, ephemeral feminist publications, and material objects. We have to work out ways to deal with problems inherent in research and teaching in women's history. How does one, researching a particular woman or group of women, contend with the problem of name changes; how many women have gotten lost in the archives because they married and surrendered their (maiden-name) identity? At a time when radical historians are justifiably attacking our concentration on great men, we must not overlook the women lodged within the papers of those famous men. How many of us neglect supposedly unimportant women's groups as sources of meaningful knowledge about a total culture? There was a time when we argued that methodological problems prevented our dealing with non-prestigious or little-known groups in history. But the training in quantification provided to the recent generation of scholars makes that argument totally untenable. Our failing is no longer one of skills and need not be one of imagination; limited perspective has been our failing, and this is the issue to which researchers, archivists, librarians, curators, and teachers must address themselves.

Let me give you an example. Not only does the CCWHP represent the interests of women in the profession and publish a newsletter, it also gathers and disseminates information on courses and on research-in-progress in women's history. A contribution from archivists, especially when they make a find useful for research in and teaching about women, would be a definite bonus. Archivists, after all, stand at the entry way to historical knowledge. They make decisions about acquisitions, they devise cataloging and retrieval schemes, they operate on certain assumptions about what materials get priority when faced with limited resources. If they fail to deal forthrightly with women in history, those who rely on their materials and assistance must suffer.

If women's studies involves the use of new materials and a fresh examination of existing materials, it also implies the need for innovative methodological approaches, both in research and teaching. Does one emphasize outstanding contributions or the persistence of suppression? Does one deal with women chronologically, from class, ethnic, and racial perspectives? Whatever the answers to these and

other questions, they point us toward solutions that are multidisciplinary and intellectually integrative in nature.

The breadth and intellectual content of women's history courses and research have been amply demonstrated. One need only refer to the *Female Studies* I through V, publications of Know, Inc., in Pittsburgh, for a comprehensive listing of women's studies courses, syllabi, and bibliographies.¹¹ In 1971 there were well over seven hundred courses¹² being offered throughout the country in areas, incidentally, where there are strong women's movement contingents—the West Coast, the Northeastern coast, New York to Pittsburgh, New Jersey and Maryland, and Chicago. Gerda Lerner's experiences at Sarah Lawrence College teaching "The Many Worlds of Women" in a multidisciplinary fashion reveal the problems and potential of such courses. Using a variety of approaches, her students were literally making history in the best scholarly sense. Finding so little or such unscholarly secondary material on women, the students uncovered and dug into primary sources. They discovered, by doing, the personal satisfactions of research and analysis.¹³

Thus far, in commenting on women's studies, I have addressed myself to the questions of need, content, organizational efforts, research, teaching materials, and methodologies. A final remark on the consequences of group efforts seems appropriate. As one index of such efforts, I made a survey of the programs for the annual meetings of the AHA and OAH from 1966 (dating the beginning of a noticeable interest in feminism) through 1972. I looked for two factors: the number of women on the program in relation to the total number of formal participants, and the number of sessions, panels, and papers that seemed related to women or their history. I have summarized my findings in Table 1 from which one could draw the conclusion that increased, organized, group involvement by women in the history profession leads to increased participation

¹¹ In addition to the bulletins of the CCWHP and the publications of Know, Inc., at least three journals are devoted to the historical treatment of women: *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*; *Female Studies*; and *The International Journal of Women's Studies*.

¹² Perhaps one of the most ambitious of the women's studies programs is that of the Women's Studies College, part of the system of experimental colleges at SUNY, Buffalo. The Women's Studies College "was created because 'Education had not taught women the skills necessary to have a critical understanding of how a society operates.'" In the spring of 1972, over thirty courses were offered in the college, the result being "a variety of points of view and an extraordinary breadth in courses, from media skills to sociological and historical analysis." Quotations from informational brochure and course catalog are available from the Women's Studies College, SUNY at Buffalo.

¹³ Gerda Lerner's observations on this course are contained in *Female Studies II* (Pittsburgh: Know, Inc., 1971), pp. 86–88.

TABLE 1
WOMEN IN THE HISTORY PROFESSION:
PARTICIPATION IN ANNUAL PROGRAMS, 1966-72

Year	Organization of American Historians				American Historical Association			
	Participation of Women/Total	% Women of Total	Sessions	Papers	Participation of Women/Total	% Women of Total	Sessions	Papers
1966	7/153	4.5%	1	1	14/340	4.1%	1	0
1967 ^a	4/173	2.3%	2	0	11/339	3.2%	1	3
1968	9/198	4.5%	0	0	19/407	4.7%	1	0
1969 ^b	2/160	1.3%	0	0	14/402	3.5%	3	0
1970 ^c	8/177	4.5%	2	0	36/474	7.6%	5	1
1971 ^d	26/250	10.4%	6	0	56/562	9.9%	7	1
1972	29/232	12.5%	5	4	70/605	11.6%	2	7

NOTE:

^a There were no women among the six formal participants conducting a plenary symposium on "The Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association: Purpose, Program, Time, and Place." This absence might suggest the profession's low level of "consciousness" about women in the profession in 1967.

^b CCWHP formed; presented resolutions on women in history profession to AHA, December 1969.

^c AHA appoints ad hoc Committee on Status of Women in the Profession; committee makes preliminary report and recommendations to AHA, December 1970. OAH appoints Committee on the Status of Women following CCWHP resolutions in April. [AHA ad hoc committee report summarized in AHA *Newsletter*, September 1971]

^d AHA appoints standing Committee on Women Historians and a special staff assistant to the committee.

by women in the programs of the annual meetings of the historical societies.¹⁴

Of particular interest at the April 1972 OAH meeting was the session on "Archival and Manuscript Sources for the Study of Women's History." Some invaluable by-products of this session were the beginning bibliography compiled by Andrea Hinding and Rosemary Richardson of the Social Welfare History Archives Center at the University of Minnesota,¹⁵ a brief guide to National Archives Hold-

¹⁴ Admittedly, I did not employ the most sophisticated tools of historical quantification; I merely counted. I also used historical imagination in some cases, counting, for example, sessions on witchcraft and the family as pertaining in some way to women (the witch syndrome dies hard!). My count of participants is not absolutely correct because of initials being used instead of full names.

¹⁵ There were many contributors to this bibliography: Robert Asher, Mari Jo

ings on Women in American History, and a sample check-list of Library of Congress manuscript holdings on women. Clearly, there is an impressively large body of material waiting to be discovered and used by student and professional researchers—sources hitherto neglected by the mainstream historians or, if consulted, used only to elaborate upon male actors in history. The enormity of these initial efforts at compilation indicates the need to conduct a national and systematic survey, a project some historians are trying to have funded.¹⁶ Incidentally, those who compiled the bibliography valued the assistance they received from archivists throughout the country. Only a few contributors to the bibliography lamented what they thought was a lack of cooperation. If there are some archivists reluctant to assist us in our search for materials in women's history, I hope those of you present will work on them; make them an offer they cannot refuse!

We do not normally think of historians as a force for revolutionary change in society. However, research into the history of women and courses which utilize this research might very well revolutionize the entire profession. I see the whole process as therapeutic, productive, and essential.

Our increasing professional demands have evoked, and will continue to evoke, a backlash. As our expectations rise and articulate professional and academic women increasingly reject roles assigned them, regardless of their educational and demonstrated, on-the-job competencies, others feel threatened. For example, in her report to the Executive Board of the OAH in April of 1972, Anne Firor Scott, chairwoman of the OAH committee on the status of women, observed, "The status of women in the profession is temporarily much improved, but evidence of the backlash has also come to our attention, much of it quite naturally originating with young men who in this tight job market feel that *they* have been discriminated against. This experience, so familiar to women scholars, comes as

Buhle, Charlotte Davis, Ellen DuBois, Andrea Hinding, Mary Lynn McCree, Roberta Balstad Miller, and Joan Hoff Wilson.

¹⁶ There is some tangible basis for hope on this matter. The Rockefeller Foundation sponsored a whole conference on "Women in American History" in June 1972. Twenty participating scholars in the field were given the opportunity to discuss the topic and to educate foundation participants about this field of scholarship. Gerda Lerner reported to the author that the conference participants believe the foundation will give serious consideration to scholarly research proposals in women's history. The Ford Foundation recently allocated \$325,000 on an experimental one-year basis for research and dissertation fellowships on the issues and implications of the women's movement.

a shock and surprise when it is encountered by a male scholar."¹⁷ We must be prepared for, but not diverted by, this reaction. The historical profession must know that we are not going to be intimidated. Women, so long the victims, must not be asked now to bear the blame for the profession's placement problems.

Those who protest the treatment of women find that traditionally oriented historians have very little understanding of the reasons, past and present, for women's disappointments. We must create new portrayals of our past and of theirs as well. Working with new questions, different values, untapped resources, and innovative methodologies, we will undoubtedly devise alternative explanations of the past.

We are moving, and surely will continue to move, beyond our educational, intellectual, and professional disappointments as women. Regardless of the hopes and predictions of some administrators, whether in universities or archives, the current movement cannot be characterized as being that of a *few* disappointed women. More than a few will translate current efforts into a sustained professional concern and real accomplishment.

¹⁷ Quoted in CCWHP *Newsletter*, vol. 3 (May 1972); copy of full report in author's possession.