

Sources for the “New Women’s History”

EVA S. MOSELEY

VIRTUALLY ALL ARCHIVISTS and manuscripts curators have had some contact with members of an advance party of the “new women’s history,” the field workers sent into hundreds of repositories by the Women’s History Sources Survey (WHSS). Conducted by the staff of the University of Minnesota’s Social Welfare History Archives Center and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the survey has given everyone in the archival profession notice that women’s history is here to stay.¹

The new women’s history, briefly defined, is that of all women and their activities, achievements, and relationships, especially those not traditionally the concern of historians. That history will be of increasing importance to archivists² as its practitioners approach more and more repositories in search of the often hidden records of more or less hidden people. Researchers will learn much about women from these records; they will also find evidence

useful in investigating two basic and intriguing questions: in what irreducible ways do men and women differ? and how do the public and private spheres influence one another? To archivists who share the author’s interest in these issues, researchers of women’s history will provide a welcome challenge, rather than an irritating distraction from collecting and research on the big names, female or male, of history.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has contrasted the new women’s history, which seeks to illuminate the non-public lives and accomplishments of elite and non-elite women, with traditional women’s history, which imitates traditional history, “Great White Men,” by showing that there were great women too.³ Traditional women’s history serves as a partial corrective to that of Great White Men; but it suffers from its acceptance of the values, categories, causality, and periodization of

¹ Andrea Hinding et al., eds. *Women’s History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1979).

² Throughout this article the word *archivists* will be used to mean both archivists and curators.

³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman and the New History,” *Feminist Studies* 3, nos. 1/2 (1976): 186 (paper given at the 1975 SAA meeting).

traditional men's history.⁴ As Smith-Rosenberg points out, women have not figured as prominently as men in what has been considered the mainstream of historical events and change; they have constituted a tiny minority of political, military, diplomatic, and religious leaders, and few have been inventors or scientists, captains of industry, union organizers, philosophers, artists, or scholars. By concentrating on women's limited contributions to *public* events and trends, while ignoring the areas in which women were active and influential, traditional women's historians have defined "the majority of American women as . . . marginal to American history."⁵

Where have women been active and important? Primarily in the private world of the family; more recently in those public institutions that have assumed family functions. This is the world that social history explores, and it is social history and the contemporary women's movement, together with the exhaustion of traditional women's history, that have given the new women's history its impetus. Division of labor in the household, kinship systems, family power relationships, child rearing, marriage, divorce, sexuality, and friendship are some of the concerns of social history. Instead of concentrating on the branches of government, social history investigates such public institutions as prisons, hospitals, schools, brothels, and churches. Any or all of these might be considered in their institutional aspect by traditional historians (though usually as

an afterthought); social historians are concerned with the people who inhabit the institutions, with the people who run them, and with the interactions between the inmates and those in charge. Clearly, women form a much larger proportion of these groups than of the public leaders listed above.

But, just as women's history can be a version of traditional history, so social history can be pursued without including women; if this were not so, there would be no need for a new *women's* history. For example, a panel on family history at the 1974 SAA meeting consisted of three male speakers, and only one of two commentators was a woman.⁶ The speakers' idea of a family was a succession of fathers, sons, and grandsons. The women existed only for breeding purposes; their feelings and activities were largely ignored, as were their power and influence. One of the male historians wondered how women responded to the 50 percent decline in the number of children per adult woman, from 7 in 1800 to 3.5 in 1900. The woman commentator asked a different kind of question. Why did more women remain single in the nineteenth century? Why did couples have fewer children? Was the decision made by the wife, the husband, or both, and how was it implemented? As in all new social history, the actions of non-elite, anonymous people are taken seriously by family historians, and some light is shed on how private decisions affect public life; but evidently few historians are willing, so far, to include women among

⁴ Gerda Lerner discussed "compensatory history" and other issues raised by women's history, in her introductory comments to the panel "Effects of Women's History upon Traditional Concepts of Historiography," at the Second Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Radcliffe College, October 1974. Berkshire Conference papers are available at the Schlesinger Library; the call number is MC 244.

⁵ Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman," p. 187.

⁶ Ellen DuBois.

the actors—rather than among those passively acted upon—in the historical drama.

Historians have used such public events as changes in political administrations to divide history into periods. But the impact of those events on ordinary citizens, female and male, has yet to be adequately explored. If social history reveals that the lives of most citizens remained fundamentally unchanged by events traditional historians have considered crucial, it will become necessary to question the significance of the epochs those historians postulate. Richard Vann has suggested that the invention of the rubber nipple was as epoch-making for women as the invention of the Bessemer converter was for men. He proposes, in a suggestive over-simplification, that "the periodization of women's history should demonstrate the stages whereby they have emancipated themselves from the reproductive process."⁷

There are still archivists, as there are historians, not convinced that any of this new social history, female or male, is worthwhile. If we consider three variables: elite/non-elite, public/private, men/women, and ask which of the eight possible combinations constitute "history," some scholars will still maintain that history consists primarily of the public lives of elite men. Other combinations that have gained some acceptance are the private lives of elite men, the public lives of a very few elite women, and the public lives of non-elite men in groups (for example, in armies and labor unions). But, more and more, the private lives of non-elite women are being accepted as also the stuff of history, and increasing num-

bers of researchers are asking for materials about such women.

The archivist confronted by researchers hoping to delve into the private lives of hitherto totally obscure people should be aware of the kinds of sources that can be useful to them. There already are extensive sources for research on middle- and upper-class women, who wrote letters and kept diaries; these can be used in new ways. But to study women on the farm, working-class women, and the anonymous poor, demographic sources are essential. Census and other statistical data can help one delineate the lives of such women: the proportion of females to males and the female mortality rate for various age groups; the numbers who married, divorced, were widowed or deserted, and at what ages; the number of children per mother and their mortality; how many women were employed, in what kinds of jobs, for how much pay—and so forth. Company personnel records, reform school, prison, court, hospital, and morgue records, when they exist and are available, will all yield useful information.⁸

Almost totally lacking for working-class women is their own comment on their lives, in contrast to the often massive outpourings of middle- and upper-class women. Although careful use of welfare, hospital, employment, or other case records can tell a researcher much, almost the only way to learn what poor women felt is through oral history, which at best reaches back only a limited number of years, and which gives a later comment on an earlier time. The difficulties in selecting subjects for such oral histories and getting

⁷ Richard T. Vann, "Towards a Periodization of Women's History," a paper given at the Second Berkshire Conference on the History of Women; see note 4, above.

⁸ See also Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman," p. 190.

significant information from them are not generally the concern of the archivist.⁹

The archivist can, however, keep an eye out for the occasional written record that does exist. In a newsletter issue on women, for instance, the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs described a manuscript of Matilda Robbins, remarkable less for its literary merit or its author's impact on society than for its rarity and its frankness about her state of mind.¹⁰ The equally rare letter of an indentured servant, tenant farmer's wife, or housemaid takes on new significance in this new history; usually buried in the individual or family papers of the masters, these documents can be brought to researchers' notice by the archivist willing to make the effort.

Much more common are reports on the poor by middle-class people: teachers, employers, reformers. For instance, the records of the earliest female reform school, the State Industrial School for Girls at Lancaster (Massachusetts), provide not only factual data about the residents but also subjective comments of the matrons.¹¹ These comments give the reader an idea of the social pressures—criticism, punishment, prescription—to which the girls were subjected. The North Bennet Street Industrial School, in Boston, is not a reform school, but again there is almost no first-hand record of those who used its clubs, classes,

and vocational placement office. Letters and reports of teachers, administrators, and the Board of Managers indicate the values and opportunities offered to the Italian immigrants of the neighborhood; there is only a rare and usually indirect hint of what the Italians felt about them.¹²

The Women's Trade Union League was an alliance of working-class and middle-class women. Its goals—protective legislation for women, child labor legislation, and unionization—were working-class goals. But its records are largely those of its middle-class leaders, except for those of the few working-class women, among them Mary Anderson, Leonora O'Reilly, and Agnes Nestor, whose talents made them leaders as well;¹³ they provide information about values and attitudes of middle-class reformers, and perhaps on their motivation and energy levels in doing what was usually unpaid or underpaid work. Records of settlement houses and of such reform groups as the Consumers' League or the Birth Control League provide similar glimpses into the private lives and thoughts of middle-class women; some records also provide evidence on the relations between female and male reformers.

The League of Women Voters, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the American Association of University Women, and similar groups include only middle- and upper-class

⁹ Whether they should be was discussed at a panel on the "activist archivist" at the 1976 SAA meeting; the papers were published in *Georgia Archive* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1977). See also F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5–13; and Lester J. Cappon's response, "The Archivist as Collector," *American Archivist* 39 (October 1976): 429–35.

¹⁰ Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, *Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1972).

¹¹ These records are the property of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts but are on deposit at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

¹² North Bennet Street Industrial School records, Schlesinger Library, call number MC 269.

¹³ The Mary Anderson and Leonora O'Reilly papers are at the Schlesinger Library (A-7 and A-39, respectively); the Agnes Nestor papers are at the Chicago Historical Society.

women; their records show the members in relatively impersonal stances dealing with public issues. But even these records can be useful for the new history. There are women at work here too, and their records will occasionally provide evidence of how and why some women devoted so much time and energy to certain causes; how this work complemented or conflicted with their family obligations; and how women have worked together.

Middle- and upper-class women, fewer in number than the poor, have left a much more voluminous record of their private thoughts and activities. The women's letters and diaries in individual and family collections might once have been used to throw light on the men in the family, or as data for compensatory history. Now those records can be read from a new perspective to answer questions about health; about attitudes toward sexuality and reproduction and such resulting actions as refusal to marry, more or less frequent intercourse, and abortion; about child rearing, from the point of view of both mother and daughter; about household management; about bonds among female friends and relatives; and so on. Family collections, with their multiple generations, make it possible not only to study the relations among women of various generations, but also to study in microcosm the changing patterns of marriage, child rearing, and work—household, volunteer, and paid work. Sometimes there is indirect evidence about another very large group of females: domestic servants.

Once the archivist accepts the new women's history as a legitimate field

of study and therefore of collection, she¹⁴ must not only look at present holdings with the new research needs in mind, but must try to find and acquire at least some of the kinds of records that will document this history directly. This requires a change in collecting policy and appraisal criteria. Assuming that a repository has a more or less well defined subject or geographical collecting area, only a small mental leap is needed to extend one's sights to include "ordinary" women. Once she has taken this leap, the archivist will find that acquisition methods, donor relations, and accessioning are much the same for women's papers as for men's.

Information about likely donor prospects will often appear in such printed sources as local newspapers, trade journals, union newspapers, and house organs. These leads, and especially obituaries, should be followed up with the same tact the archivist uses in dealing with all donors.¹⁵ By means of articles, exhibits, receptions, and especially talks to women's organizations, the archivist should also actively publicize her repository among women whose papers she is hoping to collect. The talks need not be elaborate. Usually the archivist can speak off the cuff about what she does and has (perhaps showing sample manuscripts or photographs, or slides of them), and about what she wants, and why. As a result, she might acquire the records of the organization, or a promise of them; or someone in the audience may have, or know of, just such a box of family letters as has been described. For many women, as for many men, it is a source of pride that they (or their grand-

¹⁴ Feminine pronouns are used generically throughout this article.

¹⁵ See Virginia R. Stewart, "A Primer on Manuscript Field Work," *Midwestern Archivist* 1, no. 2 (1976): 3–20.

mothers) are suddenly a recognized part of history. An article or photo in the local newspaper when the transfer is made acknowledges a benefaction and further publicizes the repository.

Researchers are a possible source of women's papers, as they have been of men's. Researchers must know that the archivist is prepared to protect their interests (usually a matter of exclusive use for a reasonable time), but even more they must be made aware of the repository's interest in collecting papers of unknown women.

Female potential donors, like males, exhibit the full range of attitudes toward their papers (or those of their ancestors) and their place in history, from extreme diffidence to excessive egotism or family pride, as well as many combinations of contradictory attitudes. Like men, some women simply want the stuff out of the house, while others worry over every scrap. Probably women, accustomed to being "just" housewives or "just" schoolteachers, or to being known as their fathers' daughters or husbands' wives, tend toward greater diffidence; they, or their families, are somewhat more likely to have destroyed their papers.

If there are extant papers, the owner may question their historical value. The archivist, in trying to convince the owner that the papers are valuable, can give an honest and enthusiastic, but not too long, explanation of how the person and papers in question form an integral part of the history of a locality, organization, movement, or whatever. A simple statement such as, "Your grandmother didn't set up the mill, but without women like her it couldn't have stayed in business," is likely to be more effective than a discourse on nineteenth-century industrialism.

The potential donor may be suspicious of an "elite" or "establishment"

repository. This suspicion may be disarmed by explaining the costliness of the special conditions and staff required to take care of papers adequately. A tour behind the scenes would show the potential donor that the staff are human, and how the papers will be stored, arranged, described, and used. It is best if the repository is open to the public and not just to a select few. The donor should know that she and others represented in the collection will be welcome to come and use the papers, and other papers as well.

It should go without saying that the negotiations with a seamstress, millworker, or clubwoman are conducted with the same care as those with a famous author or politician. Whatever forms and procedures the repository has should be used, the donor should be urged to answer questions about access, copying, and copyright as definitively, the papers should be stored as carefully, and their acquisition announced as enthusiastically.

As the expanding collecting interests of a repository become better known, people will begin to offer papers unsolicited, including some that the repository does not want. In deciding what to collect in these new areas, the archivist applies the usual appraisal criteria: evidentiary and informational value will determine *whether* papers should be collected; their subject or geographical emphases will be criteria for *where* they should be collected. Because the appraising archivist has adopted a different view of what constitutes history, she will apply these general criteria to acquire documentation of ordinary women's lives. Again, whatever can be said about appraisal applies to women and men, but many an appraising archivist, like many a social or family historian, needs an extra reminder that women are as

much a part of history as men are.¹⁶

The records of virtually all women's organizations are of interest. Whenever women band together for some common purpose, the simple fact of their taking the trouble to organize indicates that their goals or activities have some general or symptomatic significance. Furthermore, the organizational records may include case records or other quantifiable data. The North Bennet Street Industrial School records, for example, include information about employment, education, health, and welfare aid for the families of day nursery pupils and clients of the vocational placement service. Information about class attendance and club membership may be trivial in itself, but significant when used with other records, such as public welfare records, to reconstruct the lives of families in immigrant neighborhoods.¹⁷

Even an archivist whose mission it is to document the history of an institution may need to expand the scope of the records retained. For example, a college or university archivist must clearly retain evidence of the institution's history as a provider of higher education. But the college or university is also an employer, providing maintenance and clerical work for women and men, and for many of them a means of being assimilated into American or urban life. Just how the

institution has done this, and what it has meant in the lives of its employees, are well worth documenting. As with social service agencies, the university's personnel files may be the only extant record of the lives of these little known people.¹⁸

Individual and family papers are harder to appraise than they were when the main criterion was the public (usually political, military, or literary) significance of the person or the family.¹⁹ Travel diaries, numerous and often dull, take on new significance if they record the headaches or fainting spells suffered by a young lady on her Grand Tour of Europe, or if they illuminate the relationship she had with those who travelled with her. Researchers hoping to document changes in housework want to know which family members or servants cooked or dusted or did the laundry, how often, and how long it took. All information about domestic life—work, power, reproduction, education, and so on—can be useful. Janet Brodie, for instance, discovered that Mary Pierce Poor, the wife of Henry Varnum Poor (railroad economist, journalist, and originator of *Poor's Manual*), had used symbols to note in her diaries her menstrual periods and each instance of intercourse with her husband for most of their sixty-four years of married life.²⁰ Such information would be

¹⁶ "Women have been a force in making all the history that has been made": Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946), p. vi.

¹⁷ North Bennet Street Industrial School records, Schlesinger Library.

¹⁸ The appraisal questions raised by modern, bulky organizational collections or record groups are the same for women's, men's, and mixed groups. The point is that the needs of the new women's history compel us to redefine "research value." Not only the leaders of important organizations, but all the members of all groups, are of interest.

¹⁹ In fact, even the importance of a family member did not guarantee that the family papers as such would be collected. The Massachusetts Historical Society has long had the papers of Richard Henry Dana, Jr., but in 1960 the numerous diaries and letters of his mother, sister, and other female relatives were still in the hands of the family. They have since been at the Schlesinger Library.

²⁰ Janet F. Brodie, "Fertility and Family Limitation: The Henry Varnum Poores, 1840-1880," a paper given at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Mount Holyoke College, August 1978.

equally valuable in the diaries and papers of a more obscure woman. There is clearly an intimate connection between this private information and the statistics on births per adult woman; history is richer for having both.

Mr. Poor did *not* record such private information. In general, though there are numerous exceptions, the women recorded private events and the men public events. Thanks to the new women's history we can see, for instance, that household accounts give us essential information about the American economy that statistics on industrial production or trade do not. A history of obstetrical practice from the point of view of physicians tells only part of the story; more of it can be gleaned from the account by Nancy Atwood Sprague of the birth of her daughter's child,²¹ or Cyrus Taber's revelation to Allen Hamilton of his feelings when his wife died after a miscarriage.²²

All this suggests that we should collect everything, that even the smallest bit of information about the most trivial event or feeling in the life of the most obscure person might have some research value. So it might, but we obviously cannot collect everything. What not to collect is hard to define; examples of collections the Schlesinger Library has turned down may be illustrative, though not definitive. One was a group of letters (1950s and 60s) from one woman to another discussing books she had read and the moves and meetings of otherwise unknown people. There were too few letters over too many years to make a coherent story;

the other half of the correspondence had been destroyed. We suggested a local repository, where some of the people mentioned might be known, but we were pretty sure that in themselves these few letters would be meaningless anywhere.

The writer of some recent diaries had had a divorce, a nervous breakdown, and a hysterectomy; but the diaries, in the form of large, loose-leaf notebooks, had less to say about these events than about what she had had for breakfast, and they were filled with long passages copied from magazines. We decided that there was not enough substance to justify the considerable space they occupy. Some older diaries, of a Harvard professor's wife, were similarly opaque. They did report when she dusted and who came to tea, but gave never a hint of her thoughts or feelings. We might have taken them for their information on housekeeping and Cambridge social life; but they were offered by a dealer, so it was not their bulk but their price that negatively outweighed their research potential.

Perhaps we were wrong in any or all of these cases. Perhaps historians and archivists 100 years from now will be as angry at us as we are at the nineteenth-century women who, upon the death of a female relative, would collect all the letters she had written and commit them to the flames.²³ We cannot know what evidence historians 100 years from now will want, but curators and archivists can and should discuss research needs with contemporary historians and keep in mind not only that

²¹ Nancy Ann (Atwood) Sprague Papers, MC 259, 3v, Schlesinger Library; available on microfilm.

²² Hamilton Family Papers, MC 278, 42, Schlesinger Library. This is one of the "exceptions," a man commenting on a private event; but he did so in a letter to a business associate.

²³ The author has been told that in some circles this was done routinely. This may be apocryphal, but it seems bad enough to us now if it was done at all.

research interests change, but also, as Herbert Finch has pointed out, that we can have some influence on them.²⁴

Communication with researchers will help us not only in appraisal and collecting, but also in improving our finding aids. Papers readers want can be lost, even in the most well-endowed repository, because of the limits of traditional description and indexing. Some years ago, for instance, Anne Farnam set up an extensive exhibit of women's papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Few of the items she exhibited had been listed in any finding aid; she had to follow hunches and search through a great many collections to find them. As a result of her laborious efforts the staff learned much about what they had in their care. They had not previously paid much attention to the women, presumably because no one had asked about them.

Archivists can ask about their patron's current, and sometimes future, research interests in order to learn newly interesting names and subjects to point out in new finding aids; they can also encourage researchers to indicate inadequacies in description or indexing of already processed materials—inadequacies, that is, for new kinds of research.

For instance, if the aforementioned young woman touring Europe did indeed record her headaches, that collection should have a catalog entry for

Women—Health and hygiene, as well as one for *Voyages and travels*. The young woman herself, possibly buried in a collection named for her father, brother, or husband, should find her way into the card catalog or series description, as should other women represented in the papers, including servants and other employees. It should be clear that this is a matter of expanding descriptions of collections or record groups; nothing need be lost. More information can be added in the form of additional added entries in the card catalog, or an indication in the description of a manuscript collection or record group that there is information about birth control, relations between sisters, or whatever.²⁵

It is encouraging that the NHPRC's *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories* uses more subject headings than did Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts*, which it updates.²⁶ Finding aids (whether intra- or inter-repository) with few or no subject entries reflect, and encourage, an elitist approach to history. Of course notables are indexed, and readers will look directly for Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Clara Barton, by name. But readers are not likely to know the names of domestic servants, schoolteachers, mill hands, pieceworkers, or housewives. If the new history is to take these people seriously, the papers by or about them must be pointed out by means of sub-

²⁴ The author has heard, rather than read, this. C. Herbert Finch supported the notion in a private communication of 2/22/79: "The idea of archivists influencing research trends . . . was—and still is—part of the challenge of collecting work for me."

²⁵ This article is not the place to discuss the form of subject headings. Let me just say that I realize that not all repositories can follow the practice of the Schlesinger Library in changing the Library of Congress's *Women as physicians* simply to *Physicians*, as in most repositories not all the physicians are women. But I look forward to the day when the rather contemptuous *Women as . . .* headings are replaced by *Physicians—Men* and *Physicians—Women*.

²⁶ National Historical Publications and Records Commission, *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States* (Washington: National Archives and Records Service, 1978); and Philip M. Hamer, ed., *A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

ject headings or being mentioned in series descriptions. The main entry for the memoir of an immigrant woman or the diary of a schoolteacher should still be the author's name. But there must also be entries for *U.S.—Emigration and immigration* and for *Teachers*; or almost no one will be able to find the memoir or the diary.

Just as the new women's history requires that archivists add to finding aids but not substitute one kind for another, so the new women's history should be seen as adding a dimension to history, not as substituting one kind of history for another. The travel diaries filled with headaches get catalog entries for both health and travel. One can give the anonymous their due without belittling the leaders. Susan B. Anthony could not have done her work for suffrage without many women behind her; on the other hand, many of those women would have done little or nothing for suffrage without Anthony's inspiration and leadership. Anthony was not all-important, but she was important. Even as we attempt to collect and to describe adequately material on anonymous immigrant women and on the domestic life of middle-class women, we will continue to collect and to index Anthony's letters.

Extreme views jolt us loose from comfortable old patterns of thought, but soon we must arrive at new syntheses. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg minimizes the significance of the public sphere, asserting that "women's suffrage has proved of little importance either to American politics or to American women."²⁷ Suffrage has perhaps not been as important as the

traditional women's historians suggest, but it has made a difference. If women had not won the vote in 1920, or since, we would still be fighting for it; and in the suffrage movement women learned to organize, to lobby, to cooperate, and to take public risks. If the vote brought about no miraculous improvement in the nation's affairs, as some suffragists had predicted it would, that is evidence that women are human like everyone else, not morally superior, and that political, social, and economic institutions are more resistant to change than the suffragists expected. In fact, we know from our own lives that who is President, what laws are passed, whether or not the U.S. goes to war or annexes a piece of land, all do have an impact on the anonymous person's life; but they hardly begin to account for what her life is like at any historical moment. The new women's history, using papers or records about ordinary women, attempts to complete the account.

Other new information and insights can help us demote earlier points of view without discarding them altogether. Some historians believe that women have always been oppressed by men; others believe that the "oppression school" of history is wrong. But why not both? Smith-Rosenberg's valuable, pioneering research on support networks among nineteenth-century women should not blind us to the fact that women have been oppressed by men, though the oppression school, as Mary Beard warned some thirty years ago, tells a very lopsided story.²⁸ Oppression of women by women is another interesting issue.²⁹ Most obvious is the oppression of lower-class women

²⁷ Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman," p. 186.

²⁸ Beard, *Woman as Force in History*.

²⁹ And so is oppression of men by women, most notably as male infants vis-à-vis mothers or other adult females.

by those of the middle and upper classes. Even among women of the same class, *sisterhood* has not always been the prevalent relationship, much as we might wish it were. In founding the New England Women's Club in 1869, Julia Ward Howe said, "We shall learn from contact with each other to be more just and generous to our sex." Howe used the word *sisterhood* as an ideal to work toward, not to describe what she saw around her.³⁰

In revising periodization, too, a synthetic approach is most constructive. As it tries to determine what the epoch-making events for women were, the new women's history can show us how the periodization of all history might be revised. The rubber nipple was important to women, but so was the Bessemer converter; the changes steel brought about in construction, transportation, weapons, cooking utensils, and so on, have affected everyone. Then again, the rubber nipple has affected men, indirectly because of the relative freedom it allowed their mothers and wives, and directly those who, like their infant sisters, had rubber nipples put into their mouths.

Women's history has been called a specialty, or even a sub-specialty, of the specialty of social history. It is not a specialty. Women are not a sub-

group any more than men are; nor are women, as Gregory Stiverson has called us, a "special-interest group."³¹ "There are just too many of us," writes Gerda Lerner.³² And, numbers aside, it seems impossible to believe, though many do believe it, that men's public history would have been the same no matter what women were doing. A student of unemployment between 1880 and 1930 was amazed to find how many people were unemployed how much of the time; he wondered how they managed, as they didn't earn much even when employed. But his unemployed "people" were all men; had he studied women's employment and unemployment, he might have found out how the men managed when unemployed (which is not to say that he should have studied only women's unemployment).

Most archivists and manuscript curators don't write history. But, with the decisions we make, especially in appraising records and papers and in describing them, we can either promote new trends in research or throw up roadblocks in their way. Those willing to accept the idea that "history" is about what people have done and suffered—people and not just person-ages, and people of all classes, races, and sexes—will find their work more significant and more exciting.

³⁰ See the records of New England Women's Club, 178, vol. 11, entry for 30 May 1869, at Schlesinger Library.

³¹ Gregory A. Stiverson, "The Activist Archivist: A Conservative View," *Georgia Archive* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 5.

³² Lerner, introduction to panel "Effects of Women's History," p. 11: "I started out raising the question of a conceptual framework for dealing with Women's History way back in 1969, reasoning from the assumption that women were a sub-group . . . different from any other sub-group in history. . . . I have now come to the conclusion that the idea that women are some kind of sub-group . . . is wrong. It will not do; there are just too many of us." On pp. 5-6 Lerner discusses the "oppression school" of women's history.

EVA S. MOSELEY is curator of manuscripts at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. The article is a revised version of a paper read at a conference on women's history at Thomas More College, Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, in April 1976. The author received the extensive editorial advice and assistance of Katherine Kraft, a colleague at the library.