

review essays

twentieth century women

THE AMERICAN WOMAN: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970. By William H. Chafe. New York. Oxford University Press. 1972. \$8.95. THE WOMAN CITIZEN: Social Feminism in the 1920s. By J. Stanley Lemons. Urbana. University of Illinois Press. 1973. \$9.50. THE NEW WOMAN: Feminism in Greenwich Village, 1910-1920. By June Sochen. New York. Quadrangle. 1972. Cloth: \$6.95; Paper: \$3.50. MOVERS AND SHAKERS: American Women Thinkers and Activists, 1900-1970. By June Sochen. New York. Quadrangle. 1973. Cloth: \$8.95; Paper: \$3.95. WOMEN IN MODERN AMERICA: A Brief History. By Lois W. Banner. New York. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974. Paper: \$4.95. WOMANHOOD IN AMERICA: From Colonial Times to the Present. By Mary P. Ryan. New York. Franklin Watts. 1975. Cloth: \$12.50; Paper: \$5.95.

Whether one argues for separate courses on women's history or for integrating material on women into existing courses, little can happen without a body of monographs on which teacher and researcher can draw. The appearance of works dealing with women in the twentieth century ought therefore to receive notice.

One way of dividing these books is by the author's attitudes toward feminist ideology. Chafe and Lemons deprecate its importance. Lemons stresses instead a galvanizing effect of World War I, and follows the activities thereafter of such special interest and lobbying groups as the Women's Joint Congressional Committee. The Twenties, however, saw adverse developments that disarrayed the feminists and put them on the defensive. At best they could only hang on until the renewal of social conscience of the Thirties. For Lemons the women were "an important link" between Progressivism and the New Deal.

Lemons comes at his subject via an interest in Progressivism. Indeed he is careful to specify that he read Betty Friedan only after he had completed his work. However perplexing this statement, it is congruent with his characterization (and neglect) of conscious feminist ideology as a "retreat into the realm of abstract principles." His biases are clearest in his treatment of those feminists he perceives as chiefly motivated by ideology. Instead of a wide-ranging discussion of courses open to feminists after suffrage, Lemons' consideration is imbedded in a Progressive matrix: National Women's Party agitation for the ERA was destructive because it weakened the Progressive impulse. Manifestly Lemons is not wrong in setting the woman citizen within a Progressive

milieu. But these were Progressive *women*. They were operating with, motivated by, specific ideas about women, something Lemons never really comes to grips with. And they were a part of a movement still in travail, and deserve to be set in that context as well.

Chafe's chronological scale is considerably greater than Lemons', but his attitude toward feminist ideology is even more negative. In his view the revolution began, not in the Twenties, but when World War II opened unprecedented employment opportunities for women. Once large numbers of middle class married women began to work, things could never again be the same. In an afterword Chafe makes explicit previously tacit assumptions: people change not because of ideas but because of experience. Behavior, not ideology, is what counts.

One response is to question not the generalization, but Chafe's application: his concentration on employment (subtitle notwithstanding) is invaluable, but he cites nothing to eliminate other behavioral shifts as causal. Another response is to confront the author head on: without ideology, the more things changed the more they stayed the same. Instead of stressing the blurring of sex roles through employment, one might just as easily stress their perpetuation when the wife's choice of occupation was narrowly curtailed, her chances of advancement limited and her income on the average substantially less than that of her husband. Further, Chafe never fully explains why groups with traditionally high incidence of female employment have not led feminist militance. A third possible response refuses the argument: behavior and ideology are false antitheses. Insisting on a choice prevents a search for possible preconditions to employment. Getting a job may have been the expression rather than the cause of attitudinal shifts. Unless one enjoys the prominence of wreckage, it is unwise to assume one's chart shows all the shoals and reefs before the waters have been thoroughly explored.

If Lemons and Chafe play down ideology, the two books by Sochen focus specifically on feminist ideology. *The New Woman* is a small book which concentrates on Greenwich Village feminists outside the suffrage establishment. Curiously, considering the title, Sochen never explicitly defines what made the "new woman" new; education, employment and different views of sex are apparently the chief elements. Further, Sochen asserts, but hardly demonstrates, the typicality of the five women she discusses. In sum we have a narrowly-defined study of five feminists: Crystal Eastman, Henrietta Rodman, Susan Glaspell, Ida Rauh and Neith Boyce. Three of the five do not appear in *Notable American Women*, and this is one of few published studies which devotes much attention to male feminists. Nevertheless more thoughtful and more thorough books remain to be written about the Greenwich Village feminists and their relationship to other segments of the society.

Sochen's still more recent and more broad-ranging *Movers and Shakers* also comes at the subject via the ideas and actions of specific women, "intellectual shakers and activist movers." Primarily interested in the group to the left of Lemons' woman citizen, Sochen is not nearly so affirmative about the early Twenties and much of what occurred in the Thirties. She is so much less sanguine than Chafe about World War II and its aftermath that one is hard pressed to recognize the same period.

Unfortunately faults apparent in the short study of Greenwich Village are greatly magnified on this larger canvas. Too often the book is so untidy as to be out of control. Clarity is hardly served by the virtual omission of criteria for subject selection and of a working definition of feminism. Sochen's periodization and analytical framework are simply inadequate for the task. The author's characterizations create little confidence in her perspicacity. And her treatment of the Sixties and early Seventies—with startling references to "women's libbers"—is distressingly superficial. Finally, the bibliography of twentieth century women is not half so thin as the apparatus of this book would indicate.

Sochen focuses, if badly, on ideas about women; Lemons and Chafe, more successfully, on political and economic developments. Happily, Banner's *Women in Modern America* recognizes the importance of both elements. Dividing the years at 1920 and 1960, Banner discusses within each of the three periods not only economic forces, but prevailing images of women as well as feminist ideology seeking change. Indeed, her range of concerns is so great that they press hard against the constraints of space in a short, heavily-illustrated volume. Banner's book rests on work in print rather than on manuscript and archival sources, and she picks and chooses discriminatingly. She is much less optimistic about the 1920s than Lemons and, while relying heavily on Chafe's discussion of employment, rejects this too-simple analysis. Her discussion of the recent feminist resurgence is both fuller and more analytical than those of either Chafe or Sochen. Brief bibliographies at the close of each section ought to be helpful, though unfortunately they do not include radical literature or dissertations readily available on microfilm. What we have then is a book that summarizes current scholarship and perceptive journalism, analyzing and integrating

it from a perspective influenced by thoughtful contemporary feminism. It is as enticing and insightful a brief introduction to a multi-faceted subject as one could hope for, given the present state of the art.

Although Ryan's *Womanhood in America* begins in the colonial era, more than half of the long book is devoted to the twentieth century and therefore deserves mention in this context. Like Banner, Ryan is highly sensitive to the ideological constraints on woman's place. Since she makes no pretence at a survey, she has room to push further some themes only alluded to in Banner's book. For her what is most impressive about the 1920s and World War II is continuity. The apparent shifts of the twentieth century were essentially conservative, binding women more tightly in their sphere, a sphere now of family, work and consumption. Ryan comes back repeatedly to what she claims is a new emphasis on heterosexual intimacy, in the end finding the contemporary cult of feminine sexuality even more restrictive than the nineteenth century cult of motherhood. Doubtless some will choose to be put off by the book's tone, for of the volumes discussed here, this is the most argumentative. Despite lapses and rough edges, however, it is probably also the most thought-provoking for those who seek some overall framework within which to interpret women in this century.

It takes no radical perspective to recognize that the slighting of women in the typical text and lecture course is unjust to women and a serious, avoidable distortion of our past. But to be persuaded that women's history ought to receive more attention in one's courses is not always the same as being able to rectify the situation. Happily, these six books provide the conscientious teacher with valuable material to fill gaps and improve generalizations about American women, indeed, about American society at large. None of these books is above undergraduate comprehension; particularly Banner or Chafe, both in paperback editions, would serve nicely as collateral course reading. And for the teacher so inclined, these six studies can be used to illustrate well the effects on historical investigation of different assumptions about women and about how our society works.

In a field as little worked as the history of women, one ought be grateful for any serious contribution. But these six books demonstrate that if careful scholarship is better than careless work, scholarship informed—by a matured feminism is better yet. The six also demonstrate that making sense of the history of women demands all the sophistication historians can bring to the job. For the imaginative searcher, sources for the history of women are available in embarrassing abundance. But in women's history, as elsewhere, usually the difficult hurdles are the conceptual ones. In this area, the argument has begun, but only barely. Where these authors have rushed in, others ought also to tread.

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culture and the new deal

THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT: Plays, Relief and Politics, 1935-1939. By Jane DeHart Mathews. Princeton. Princeton University Press. 1967. **THE NEW DEAL FOR ARTISTS.** By Richard D. McKinzie. Princeton. Princeton University Press. 1973. Cloth: \$19.00; Paper: \$6.95. **THE DREAM AND THE DEAL.** By Jerre Mangione. Boston. Little, Brown and Co. 1972. Cloth: \$12.50; Paper (Avon): \$3.95.

In the arts, economic recession hits hard. Theater and concert-going, the buying of books and paintings are often curtailed as families and individuals stretch shrinking budgets to cover necessities. In such periods, the idea of public funding of the arts often surfaces. In the 1930's, such government support was instituted and the last years have produced a number of studies of the New Deal cultural projects.

The three books under discussion detail government support for the Theatre, Art and Writers Projects during the life of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Harry Hopkins' wide-ranging agency for public employment. Mathews describes the course of the drama project as it presented *MacBeth* in Harlem, circuses in the Midwest and "theater in the park" in urban neighborhoods. McKinzie reveals the tremendous bureaucratic problems involved in requiring painters, sculptors and print