

review essay

spherical history

an approach to women's history

THE CHAINS OF PROTECTION: The Judicial Response to Women's Labor Legislation. By Judith A. Baer. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1978. \$16.95.

FEMINISM & SUFFRAGE: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869. By Ellen Carol DuBois. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1978. \$12.50.

BEYOND HER SPHERE: Women & the Profession in American History. By Barbara J. Harris. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1978. \$15.95.

THE SLAVERY OF SEX: Feminist-Abolitionists in America. By Blanche Glassman Hersch. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1978. \$14.50.

Beyond Her Sphere, the title of Barbara J. Harris' study, captures the general theme of this well-written, well-researched collection of books in women's history. All are concerned with the concept of two spheres—home and family composed the women's sphere, politics and careers the men's—and with the movements by nineteenth and twentieth-century feminists to expand the women's sphere or, better yet, to dissolve both spheres entirely. All four authors explain that their commitment to the 1970s women's liberation movement led them to search for the antecedents of feminism and to uncover historic role models. Each book in its way adds to our understanding of critical roles women played in American history.

Of these works, Blanche Glassman Hersh's *The Slavery of Sex* treats the earliest historical period. Hersh focuses on fifty-one feminist abolitionists during the 1830s to 1850s and sketches their family background, education, religious beliefs, personalities, marital relationships and general involvement in reform movements. Few of these women fit the stereotype of embittered, aggressive spinsters; the overwhelming majority were married, optimistic in outlook, maternal in

style and feminine in dress. Hersh demonstrates the critical role played by supporting husbands in egalitarian marriages. These middle-class women did not transcend their "elitist" and "racist" backgrounds; their participation in the temperance movement was an understandable outgrowth of their belief in the moral superiority of women. Nearly all the feminist-abolitionists were Quakers or Unitarians. Two theses emerged from their rhetoric: women were the natural foes of slavery, and women had a special obligation because members of their own sex were in bondage. The double meaning of the slavery of sex becomes apparent as Hersh weaves for us the history of the feminist-abolitionists.

Feminism and Suffrage by Ellen Carol DuBois picks up the history where Hersh leaves off and carries the story of the radical feminists into the 1870s. The war years were filled with difficulties and the post-war years brought a split in the feminists into two associations. Both defined women's emancipation and equality in terms of the franchise, but differed on the proper tactics and timing to secure suffrage. DuBois argues that women learned a great deal about agitation tactics from their involvement in Garrisonian abolition activities, but that the women faltered badly when they finally began to organize independently. The decisions by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony to ally themselves with Kansas copperheads and to fight *against* the fifteenth amendment because it did not include women demonstrate their confusion. DuBois rescues women political leaders from obscurity and argues that any comprehensive study of Reconstruction must include a discussion of the movement to emancipate women. In fact, DuBois feels that the nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement, along with black liberation and the labor movements, are the three major democratic reform efforts in American history. DuBois' section on the Working Women's Association and the roles of the women type-setters highlights the problems and tensions between unions and women workers. Failing to form a viable alliance with Republicans, abolitionists or labor union leaders, the suffragists were forced to create their own networks. The wonder is that they ever managed.

Beyond Her Sphere focuses on women and the professions in American history. Harris argues that when women demanded access to the professions they were confronted with two widely held social prejudices: women were intellectually inferior to men, and respectable women should not work outside the home. The first attitude Harris traces back to the fusion of classical, Christian and Germanic traditions in the early Middle Ages. Harris argues that women were excluded from the professions which developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only in the late nineteenth century or even later did women get a foothold into the ministry, the law, medicine and academe. Harris synthesizes the work of a series of scholars on women's history and concludes that it is not surprising that women still face discrimination today.

Judith A. Baer's *Chains of Protection* concentrates on the twentieth-century judicial responses to women's labor legislation. Her

analysis is divided into four parts: pre-*Muller v Oregon*, 1908 to 1937, 1937 to the present, with a special section on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Pay Act of 1963. Baer argues that the courts emphasized the differences between men and women in order to secure legislation to protect women when it was impossible to protect all workers, but that this tactic backfired when later courts denied women equal competition for jobs. More recently, courts have declared sex discrimination illegal. The tension between protection and restriction is the underlying theme of this first study to probe the nature and document the shift of judicial attitudes.

All four books help chronicle the history of American women, but also illustrate how much is left to do. Hersh's collective biography relies heavily on letters, diaries and *Notable American Women*; DuBois' political-intellectual study uses journals, newspapers and Stanton and Anthony's six-volume *History of Women's Suffrage*; Harris' historiographical investigation combines the findings of many scholars; and Baer's constitutional treatise is grounded in court cases. What is missing from all of these books is a definition of feminism, a thorough explanation and documentation of the development of the two-sphere concept and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the feminists. Did the activities of the feminist-abolitionists help or hinder the overall efforts to improve the status of women? Were the suffragists more important to the general advancement of women than the leaders of women's clubs, founders of co-educational and women's colleges, leaders of the temperance movements or the home-oriented "domestic feminists"? What were the relationships among the different types of feminists? More basically, what was the legal, political and economic status of women in the 1830s? 1850s? 1870s? How did the two-sphere system work in practice? Who was responsible for the major legal and social changes which took place in these decades? If the feminist-abolitionists and suffragists were, we need systematically to trace and document their efforts. The choice of heroines to celebrate from the past very much depends on what feminists today are trying to achieve. Baer wants to influence judges, Harris to open up professional careers, Hersh and DuBois to give direction to radical movements. In the process of arguing for their positions, however, they too often ignore the actual historical conditions, needs and achievements of most women.

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