Books

Gorda Lerner

Women's History


The authors of these important and informative volumes, Bonnie S. Anderson, a historian at Brooklyn College, and Judith P. Zinsser, a member of the humanities department of the United Nations International School, came to their task because of the disparity between their traditional training in European history, which omitted the history and activities of women, and their own growing knowledge of women's history. They decided to synthesize recent scholarship in women's history in order "to counter the subtly denigrating myth that women either 'have no history' or have achieved little worthy of inclusion in the historical record..."

They have succeeded admirably. Their book is interesting and well-based in representative scholarship in European women's history. It is an excellent introduction to the subject of European women's
history. While offering a broad overview, the authors also stress a few major themes, such as class differences, women's power and influence, and women's struggle against misogyny. Last, but by no means least, they introduce the reader to a fascinating array of individual women, some well-known, but mostly not, whom anyone would find worth knowing.

The broad thematic approach is particularly appropriate for dealing with groups of women who are not easily accessible through traditional sources. The description of "The Constants of the Peasant Woman's World: The Ninth to the Twentieth Centuries" is remarkably vivid, precise, and imaginative. We learn the exact composition of peasant societies and property relations, and their ideas and intellectual strivings. We empathize with the learned Renaissance woman, forced to give up their sexual and familial roles in order to pursue their learning. The voices of common women speak strongly and unforgettably, such as the testimony of eleven-year-old Eliza Coats, who told an English parliamentary commission in 1842 that she and her brother pushed carts loaded with coal in the mines. "It tires me a great deal, and tires my back and arms. . . . I can't read; I have never been to school. . . . I have had no shoes to go in to school. . . . I think God made the world, but I don't know where God is. I never heard of Jesus Christ."

The organization of this book departs deliberately from traditional historical patterns. The authors explain their conceptual framework in the introduction: Their central thesis is that "gender has been the most important factor in shaping the lives of European women. . . . While differences of historical era, class, and nationality have significance for women, they are outweighed by the similarities decreed by gender. [It] gives a basic commonality to the lives of all European women."

Further, "until very recently all women were defined by their relationship to men." Most women have lived their lives as members of a male-dominated family and have been responsible for childrearing and household maintenance. Women's work, whether inside the home or outside of it, has been undervalued. Most women have always had to work at other than domestic chores; the double burden "of caring for family and home and earning additional incomes has characterized the lives of most European women and differentiated them from men."

Finally, the misogynist tradition, which denies women's full humanity, reappears "in every era and every European nation. . . . These negative cultural traditions have proven the most powerful and the most resistant to change."

These observations have been widely accepted by historians in the field, although many of them would include in the list of women's commodities the universal feature of control of women's sexuality and reproduction by men. In omitting this, Anderson and Zinsser follow a tradition that deals with sexuality and reproduction mostly from the demographic perspective. The more radical feminist analysis, which sees the question of sexual control by men over women as a central aspect of women's historic situation, in my opinion offers a richer and more complex perspective. But that is a matter of the authors' philosophy on which reasonable people could well disagree.

Starting from a conceptual framework that is representative of current scholarship in women's history, Anderson and Zinsser go considerably further: They conclude that the similarities of women's condition based on gender are greater than the distinctions between women based on class, nation, or historical era. This theoretical approach leads them to the novel organization of these two volumes. They tell the story of European women as an entity, not divided or significantly affected by nationality. And taking off from Joan Kelly's insightful remark that "one of the tasks of women's history is to call into question accepted schemes of periodization," they throw periodization out altogether, except for major periods such as the Middle Ages, the world from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and the modern world. Instead, they tell the story of women by concentrating on women's functions within European society. The result of this approach is ambiguous.

It is arresting, certainly, and forces our attention
away from the traditional framework of patriarchal
history, which is all to the good. It places women at
the center of inquiry. I am well aware of the
advantages of this approach, because I organized a
collection of women's history documents in this
way, disregarding chronology and emphasizing
aspects of the female experience as organizing
principles. In the late 1970s, this approach was
innovative and called attention to the continuities in
the female experience, such as the sameness of
housework and domestic work over several centu-
ries. It also made the self-perceptions of women the
focus of attention, especially since most of the
documents in the collection were first-person
accounts. These advantages still operate; but this
organization is not as appropriate to a narrative
history spanning more than a millennium and
encompassing several national entities. The authors'
disregard for national entities has the effect of
emphasizing similarities while disregarding differ-
cences. This may seem to bear out the authors' thesis,
but it does so at the cost of distorting the historical
evidence by omission. For example, industrializa-
tion proceeded quite differently in various continen-
tal countries and in England. Yet in this account it
appears that for women the process and the outcome
were everywhere the same. In fact the enactment of
labor-protective and mother-protective legislation
varied greatly in different countries, as did the
specific ways in which welfare-state legislation
addressed the needs of women. This kind of
specificity is lost through over-generalization.

Interestingly, the way this book is organized has
the effect of contradicting the authors' thesis in
regard to class. As stated above, the accounts of the
various groups of women, such as peasants, ladies of
the manor, urban workers, and so on, offer a vivid
group portrait in which differences by class are
dramatically made visible. The overall effect of this
organization is to illustrate the importance of class
differences among women, something the authors
deny in their basic conceptual framework.

The departure from traditional chronology is
probably the most problematic aspect of this book; it
has the effect of flattening women's history to a
degree that distorts its reality.

Women, throughout historical time, have lived in
a world dominated by men. They participated in
creating that world, maintaining it, transmitting its
values to their children, and, within its confines,
they bargained for improvements in their own
conditions. One can argue, and I think Anderson and
Zinsser show convincingly, that women also created
what has sometimes been called a "women's
organization, a series of "free spaces" in which
women could develop their own way of life and
formulate their own vision of society. Such free
spaces were often seriously confined by patriarchal
constraints, such as the female abbeys and convents
of the early Middle Ages, or the female salons of the
eighteenth century, which depended for their
existence on the saloniers' ability to please the men
who supported them. Above all, women have shared
in the major transforming events of history, whether
they caused them or not, whether they adapted or
transformed them. It is this later point that is lacking
in the design of this book.

The authors say persuasively, "Traditional
approaches to history must be adjusted and augmented
to include the female as well as the male." In these
volumes they have offered us a somewhat disembod-
ied slice of actual history, the history of women told
as though the history of men did not exist. This is a
useful counterweight to a centuries-old approach that
presents the history of men as if it represented the
history of women as well. To say that the "solution"
for transforming the historical account so as to
include both men and women as principal actors has
eluded the authors of this book is not to say that
anyone could have done much better, given the
present state of scholarship in the field. They have
provided us with a thoughtful and carefully selected
synthesis that is not only worthwhile in its own right
but challenging in the questions it raises and fails to
resolve.

Judith Stein

The Robeson Story

PAUL ROBESON, by Martin Bauml Duberman. New

Martin Duberman's excellent biography supplies
a great deal of new information and insight about a
man previously shrouded in myth. What Paul
Robeson thought is still elusive—he wrote very little
and maintained a "protective secretiveness" that not
even his friends could penetrate. But Duberman's
sympathetic portrait of the public man facilitates
interpretation.

Duberman's book benefits from but shares the
limits of recent revisionist work on the Communist
party (CP). This history has revealed important
truths about the party's American roots—except that
in these treatments communism itself tends to

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