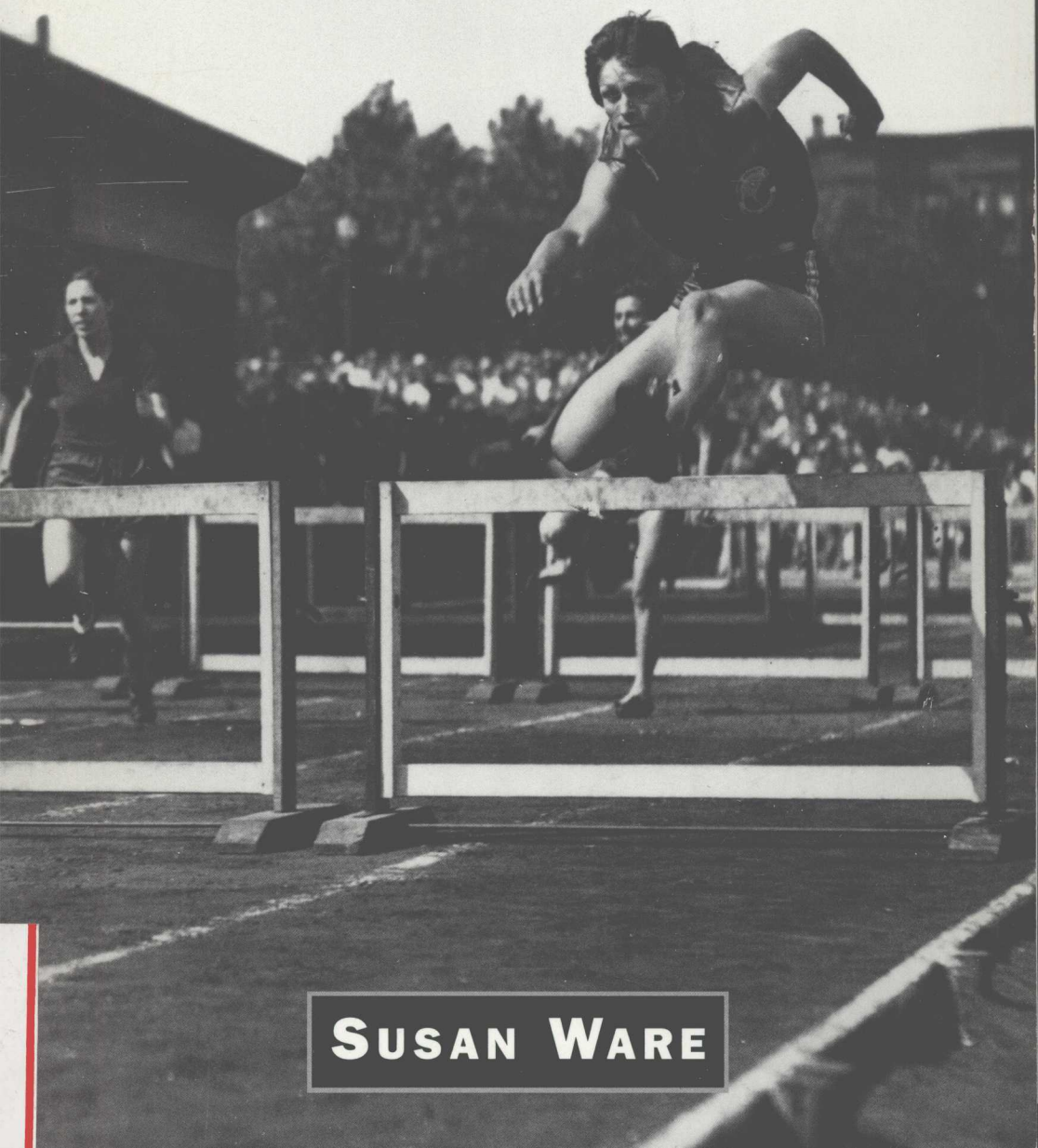


MODERN AMERICAN WOMEN

A Documentary History



SUSAN WARE

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A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

Susan Ware

Radcliffe College

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Preparing a second edition of this anthology has given me the chance to renew old acquaintances and make new friends as I decided which selections to keep and which to add. Just reviewing the new scholarship that has appeared since the first edition in 1989 confirms the vitality of women's history, a field of which I am proud to be a part.

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Susan Ware

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Susan Ware specializes in twentieth-century U.S. history and the history of American Women. She is the author of *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (1993); *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics* (1987); *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (1982); and *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (1981). After teaching in the history department of New York University for nine years, she left NYU in 1995 and is currently an independent scholar based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For 1996-1997 she is an Honorary Visiting Scholar at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College.

INTRODUCTION

How does the world look through women's eyes? How have different women viewed that world? How does our perception of history change when women are placed at its center rather than on the margins? This anthology provides a woman-centered view of modern America. With only two exceptions (Supreme Court decisions on protective legislation and abortion), every document was written by women about women. Alas, there were no women on the Supreme Court until 1981, or perhaps those documents too would have been a woman's work. In this book, history unfolds through the perspectives of the participants—women themselves—rather than through prescriptive literature designed to tell women what they ought to do and who they ought to be. When women tell their own stories, they emerge as actors and participants in a host of activities beyond home and family, providing strong evidence for the pioneer feminist historian Mary Beard's characterization of women as *force in history*.

In keeping with feminist scholarship and women's history methodology, no single female voice emerges from these documents, but rather a multiplicity of voices. There are intellectuals and housewives, seasoned political veterans and teenagers, radicals and antifeminists. Stories describe the despair of the unemployed in the 1930s and the anger of women on welfare in the 1960s, the exhilaration of learning to ride a bicycle in the 1890s and the thrill of experimenting with new feminist lifestyles in the 1920s. There are many women of courage in this anthology—settlement house leaders, civil rights activists, pioneer doctors, labor organizers, writers, and radicals, all of whom helped to shape the course of modern American history. There are also women whose courage was more private: women trying to feed their families during hard times, an anxious rural mother worrying that the doctor would not get there when her labor pains began, Japanese-American women coping with forced relocation during World War II, women living with disease or disabilities. The experiences of both the extraordinary women who shape public events and the or-

dinary women whose lives comprise the social history of the times find their places here.

This anthology is dedicated to documenting the diversity of American women's lives. There is much more to the story of American women in the twentieth century than the perspectives of the white, middle-class, urban, heterosexual women who have been its most visible actors. For every experience of a white woman, it is necessary to think how the lives of black women or Latinas or Native Americans might have been different, while also remembering the significant differences among minority women themselves. For every example from urban America, we need to recall the experiences of rural women, who were after all a majority until the 1920s and a significant minority every since. And it is vitally important to contrast the lives of married women with their unmarried sisters, especially those who chose to remain single as an expression of a different sexual or affectional preference.

Two methodological tools are useful for highlighting and interpreting an even further diversity in women's lives. The first is the *life cycle*: that is, looking at women's experiences over the entire course of their lives. Women who choose to marry and have children can still spend a majority of their adult years working outside the home—in other words, once a homemaker, not necessarily always a homemaker. Women born and raised on farms might move *el rancho al barrio*—from rural area to the city—only to return late in life to the rural communities where they grew up. This life-cycle approach has the potential to capture the cumulative effects of small changes over time. It also can demonstrate how women's lives are shaped by outside events at the same time they are changing from within.

The other useful tool for understanding twentieth-century women's history is a *generational approach*. At any given historical moment, several generations of women are participating in events and interacting among themselves. A generational approach is especially well suited to understanding the 1920s and the 1980s and 1990s, two periods in which younger women inherited the victories of earlier feminist activism without having to fight for the gains themselves. A generational approach dramatically increases the complexity of the story historians are trying to tell, because at any given moment women of different age groups may be undergoing very different experiences. In conjunction with attention to the life cycle and minority perspectives, a generational approach reminds us that a host of factors simultaneously shape women's lives—ranging from class, ethnic, or racial identification to sexual preference, age, and geographical location. There can be no such thing as a "typical American woman"; instead there are stories of a multitude of American women.

This anthology is divided into three parts, with its periodization designed to help structure and organize the past century of American women's history. Part One covers the period between 1890 and 1920, when women literally and figuratively left the nineteenth century behind and stepped into the modern era and into a period of reform that historians refer to as the Progressive era. Part Two traces women's lives in the postsuffrage era, situating their individual stories within pe-

riods of prosperity alternating with depression, world wars and their aftermaths, periods of conservatism and incipient political activism. Part Three focuses on the revival of feminism and its aftershocks, with 1963 chosen as a symbolic starting date because that year marked the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The new realities in women's lives are here to stay, although they continue to be the subject of ongoing public debate about their meaning and future.

The portrait that emerges from this collection of women's voices confirms the resourcefulness of American women and demonstrates their contributions to the shaping of the society at large. It captures women's hopes and aspirations for themselves, their families, and their communities, as well as their inevitable disappointments and setbacks. The history of the twentieth century, both its politics and everyday life, looks richer, fuller, and certainly more representative when the diverse stories of the nation's women occupy center stage. Here, then, is modern women's America.

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PART ONE

*Modern Women
in the Making*
1890–1920

Visions of the New Woman

By the 1890s, a new woman had appeared on the American scene in education, athletics, reform, and the job market. One way to capture what was “new” about the new woman is to examine how she was dressed. Rather than encumbered in yards of material, heavy corsets, and petticoats like her mother and grandmother wore, the new woman was dressed comfortably in tailored suits or long dark skirts worn with simple blouses. Artist Charles Dana Gibson popularized this image of women with his magazine illustrations of “Gibson Girls.” The new styles were more than just a change in fashion. Not only did these women look self-reliant, but they acted that way. Style changes allowed more freedom of movement, increased athleticism, and more physicality on the part of women who were no longer confined by corsets and hoop-skirts. As such, the new style symbolized the freedom and opportunity available to the new woman of the 1890s.

The new woman was one product of the vast changes under way in American society due to the maturation of the American economy and the growing urban orientation of the country. The increase in opportunity for higher education for women in the late nineteenth century and the corresponding growth in professional careers provided avenues for gainful employment and a viable alternative to marriage. In many ways, the late nineteenth century was a golden age for single women: such women as settlement pioneer Jane Addams were widely revered for their contributions to public life. Approximately 10 percent of the cohort of women born between 1860 and 1880 remained single—one of the highest rates recorded. Choosing not to marry did not mean, however, giving up a fulfilling emotional life, for many of these new professional women chose to share their lives with other women in lifelong relationships.

In addition to these changes for single women, there were also important changes in the lives of married women, especially the white, middle-class homemakers who lived in urban areas. Technological changes began to free

women from some of the hardest toil associated with housekeeping. Such improvements as central heating, electricity, indoor plumbing, and kitchen appliances lightened their chores; so too did the availability of store-bought goods and food, such as commercially baked bread or men's ready-to-wear clothing. The family was completing a long-term shift from a unit of production to one of consumption. In a related trend, as more families settled in urban areas rather than rural, the economic rewards of large families diminished. The birth rate had declined steadily throughout the nineteenth century, and by 1900, women were having an average of 3.5 children, half the level in 1800.

The lessened time that middle-class women devoted to housekeeping and child rearing helped pave the way for women's increased activism beyond the four walls of their homes. One of the most striking characteristics of American society by the 1890s was the proliferation of women's organizations. The key to understanding this development lies in the way that women extended the values they prized in their families and domestic sphere to the broader body politic. Historian Mary Beard described how this progression worked in a 1915 study of women's work in municipalities:

Woman's historic function having been along the line of cleanliness, her instinct when she looks forth from her own clean windows is toward public cleanliness. Her indoor battle has been against the dirt that blew in from outside, against the dust and ashes of the streets, and the particles of germ-laden matter carried in from neglected refuse piles. Ultimately she begins to take an interest in that portion of municipal dusting and sweeping assigned to men: namely street cleaning.

This ideology is often called *municipal housekeeping*.

Historians usually refer to the period between 1890 and 1920 as the Progressive era. During this cycle of reform and activism, the United States began to confront the problems raised by its recent industrialization, the massive immigration under way, and the increasing concentration of population in urban areas. Although no one strand unifies Progressive era historiography, the period certainly looks different when women are included. Instead of just hearing about efficiency, regulation, scientific management, and experts (the dominant interpretations of men's participation), the women's perspective directs attention toward humanitarian and social reform: concern for child labor, unhealthy conditions in city neighborhoods, and long hours and low pay in factories or sweatshops. What had long been women's province through voluntary associations and charitable benevolence was increasingly defined as a proper scope for public policy.

Middle-class women, black and white, did not lack institutional or organizational bodies with which to influence public policy. Starting with the women's club movement in the post-Civil War period, women strove to fuse politics with their domestic ideals. Such an ideology also helped the final push for suffrage. The responsibilities that instruments of government increasingly took on for improving the social welfare of citizens testifies to women's impact. Women's ac-