

# **CHANGING IDEAS ABOUT WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES, 1776–1825**

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Janet Wilson James

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THE UNITED STATES, 1776–1825**

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JANET WILSON JAMES

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## INTRODUCTION: RECOLLECTIONS OF A VETERAN IN WOMEN'S HISTORY

The work that follows, completed in 1954, will be familiar to many scholars who have borrowed the dissertation copy on interlibrary loan. I am grateful to Garland Publishing for making it available in print. Studies published since the explosion of interest in women's history in the late 1960s have added new information and new dimensions to our understanding, throwing the limitations of this older work into relief. Yet it is still authoritative as an account of a body of opinion about women's nature and role that found favor with the American reading public during the first half-century after independence. It also constitutes a connecting link in the historiography of the field, as one of the few examples of women's history scholarship from the generation preceding the present one, when feminism was at a low ebb and social history emerging from its formative stage.

The study is reproduced in its original form, with the addition of this introductory essay and an index. The essay is an attempt to describe informally the environment in which the book was conceived and written and may have some intrinsic value for those interested in the field of women's history.

It may be of interest to begin with to know how a doctoral candidate came to work in women's history in those unpropitious years. In 1945 probably nowhere but at Harvard would she have been steered into such a topic, and nowhere else would its viability as a contribution to knowledge and a springboard into the profession have been taken for granted. Arthur M. Schlesinger's students were all aware of his long-standing interest in women's history. Within the profession he had pioneered in the definition and synthesis of social history, and women's role had been one of the New Viewpoints in American History he had proposed in an influential book of 1922. He had few women students: only four among his seventy-two Ph.D.s. It was therefore no surprise to anybody when I headed in that direction.

Privately I had doubts, a real urge to find out about women in the past competing with an uneasy feeling that the subject was out of the mainstream, not one a man would have chosen, and therefore second-class. But Schlesinger's professional eminence and the weight of his personality allowed little doubt as to the wisdom of the undertaking. It was decided that I would investigate the antebellum era, building upon Elisabeth Dexter, Mary Benson, and Julia Spruill's work on women in early America.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dexter, Colonial Women of Affairs (Boston, 1924); Benson, Women in Eighteenth-Century America: A Study of Opinion

After only a week or two of reading, my misgivings evaporated. The literature in the field was very scanty, and I could see that I had embarked on an exciting voyage of discovery. In my pre-teens I had consumed narratives about polar explorers and compiled a scrapbook, inspired by reading in the newspapers in 1930 about the Arctic discovery of the remains of the lost Andr  e expedition of 1897. At age eleven there had appeared to be little opportunity for a girl in exploring. At twenty-six, a voyage into the history of women seemed likely not only to produce a dissertation and that important first book but to continue for a scholarly lifetime.

Thus I plunged, in the then approved manner, innocent of preconceptions, hypotheses, or models, into the sea of printed sources. But the grand survey of ideas about women, as I framed the title in the limited vocabulary then current, was never written. After two years of research I returned with masses of material and many questions to Dexter, Benson, and Spruill. But I had moved from descriptive social history into a tentative sort of intellectual history, and the explanations I needed weren't there. My efforts to find them gradually turned into this study of opinion before 1825, sufficient for a dissertation but too slight for a book in the market of 1954.

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and Social Usage (New York, 1935); Spruill, Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies (Chapel Hill, 1938).



The rest of that decade went into family concerns. Bringing up a son and a daughter merged into the creation, during the 1960s, of a reference work, Notable American Women, 1607-1950 -- edited with my husband -- and the development of the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, as its third director. In 1971 I began teaching American social history and women's history at Boston College. Thinking again about research of my own, I confronted the boxes of notes on antebellum women and my old hopes. But social history, social science, and the feminist impulse were writing new programs. The time for my survey, based largely on prescriptive writings, had passed. In the end I abandoned my relic and joined the new generation.

As I made my way through the American Ladies' Magazine and Godey's Lady's Book, back during that first year of research, I discovered that the debate which I was tracking in the mid-nineteenth century was still going on in the middle of the twentieth. Philip Wylie's Generation of Vipers (1942), a wartime satire on our national materialism, lambasted the American mother as a greedy emotional parasite. Members of the armed forces participating in off-duty education programs were encouraged to discuss the question "Do You Want Your Wife to Work after the War?"; Elmo Roper conducted a survey for Fortune magazine in 1946

on the same issue. The next year the best-selling Modern Woman: The Lost Sex warned that social health depended on woman's fulfillment of her sexual role; this fitted the postwar mood and was interesting to many as their introduction to Freud. Margery Wilson, a popular authority on etiquette and charm, declared ambiguously that "a real woman, wants to fill the need of a mate who exercises the age-old authority in their relationship," even though "many men . . . can't tell the difference between authority and tyranny."<sup>2</sup>

That same year the American Academy of Political and Social Science for the third time in the twentieth century published a book-length research study on the sex, Women's Opportunities and Responsibilities, "to assist the public in forming an intelligent and accurate opinion." Its editor, Louise M. Young, reflected that changes in the status of women could not be "measured in terms of victories won or rights established. . . ." She pointed as an example to the field of education, where women had equal opportunity with men but were "denied all but the most meager opportunities for social usefulness in the professional fields to which most education is directed."

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2 "Do You Want Your Wife to Work after the War?" (Washington: War Department, 1944); Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (New York, 1947); Wilson, How to Make the Most of Wife (Philadelphia, 1947).

Freedom and equality, she said, were states of mind; their realization for women was being impeded by cultural mores.<sup>3</sup>

Discovering such parallels between past and present added zest to the pursuit of scholarship but complicated one's life. In the forties most of us believed that our rights had been won and those tiresome old issues laid to rest. Women had joined the world of men and therefore were equal. In my middle-class universe (the WASP one that we who belonged to it still thought of as the norm), we tended to assume that convention and the status quo were normalcy. The kind of change that was to come with the affluent sixties lay beyond the ken of a generation battered by depression and a second world war. Social and sexual mores had been stabilized. Blacks were still Negroes or even negroes, their disabilities largely ignored by the white community. A minority meant the losing side in a vote.

That was the day of the one-career family. The husband had the career, and the wife was the support force: aide and adviser, household manager and director of the family. Perhaps it seemed like equality because besides having the vote we shared authority at home. In the post-war years most young wives of my generation were supplementing the benefits of the GI bill with their earnings to

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<sup>3</sup> Young, ed., Women's Opportunities and Responsibilities, American Academy of Political and Social Science, Annals, 251 (May, 1947), inside front cover, viii.

put their husbands through graduate school and looking forward to the time when they could stop working and start their families. One had the impression not so much that they had consciously given up the development of their own intellect and talents as that no one had given any thought to the matter. Many academic wives, in that day before public and private foundation grants, became expert research assistants, editors, and typists, without recognition other than often heartfelt tributes in husbands' prefaces.

In the women's colleges which had been my habitat since the 1930s undergraduates seldom made long-term plans for employment or self-support. Many got excellent leadership experience in student activities, which in later years they put to use in volunteer community work. We tended to be passive in class and had little intellectual dialogue of our own. There was no such thing as a feminist on my campus. A small core of radical opinion subsisted among scholarship students living in cooperative dormitories. The chief leaven in campus intellectual and political life, they promoted such causes as pacifism, labor organization, and the popular-front American Student Union. The women's colleges routinely saluted distinguished women in the professions or public life with honorary degrees but were not heard to worry about the small percentage of their alumnae in these walks of life or occupying seats of power anywhere. Power was not publicly mentioned any more than sex.

Subconsciously we felt that the price of success in the public as in the private world was feminine grace and accommodating ladylike behavior.

At most of the women's colleges, half or more of the faculty were women, including a generous number of scholar-professors, unforgettable teachers. If they produced major original work, like Mildred Campbell of Vassar, Nellie Neilson of Mount Holyoke, or Marjorie Nicolson of Smith, they were recognized in the profession -- even, in Nicolson's case, advanced to a major university post -- though they remained on the social sidelines at professional meetings. Most poured their energy into teaching and college affairs and seldom published; in explanation it was sometimes observed that they did not have supportive wives to keep house, help in research, and care for aged relatives. Little note was taken of the fact that men often did not publish much either. Women professors often shared living quarters; we did not discuss their sex life, assuming that they had none.

The small number of married women faculty had a special glamor; a pregnant professor, an astounding rarity, was the subject of warm and sympathetic student interest. Married women pursued academic life, however, under considerable handicap. The mores did not encourage mothers of small children to pursue a career; they experienced long delays in completing dissertations, degrees, and books, and

sometimes their courage flagged. Few dropped out permanently, but when they returned to employment it was usually not to a place on the academic ladder. Holding subordinate and untenured jobs in research, editing, and administration, often part-time, they enjoyed the change from home, using their talents, and supplementing the family income, and took for granted, most of the time, the fact that they got less recognition and pay than their work warranted.

Most professional women, in my observation, are feminists to some degree, whether or not they have a movement to belong to. The ideology one developed in the forties was highly practical, subservient to convention, and centered on the needs of women of the same class and color. Family or literary role models could be predisposing influences. A tradition central in my mother's family was the experience of her grandmother, a Congressman's widow who had brought up five children in the 1870s and 1880s with the aid of the postmastership in an Oregon frontier town. As a child I had recognized a kindred spirit in Louisa Alcott; in high school I responded to Jane Austen and Vera Brittain. Testament of Youth (1933) was my introduction to modern feminism, but I recovered this memory only when rereading the book after its dramatization on TV in 1980.

Certainly I encountered no women's movement to associate with. In the thirties and forties moral crusades and

emotional appeals were under suspicion. The idealism of World War I now appeared to have been naiveté, its rallying slogans an exercise in propaganda. Hitler and Mussolini's harangues had turned suspicion into alarm. The aftermath of the prohibition crusade had been particularly disillusioning for those who had believed that this reform, so long associated with women and religion (read Protestantism) would be a cure for all society's ills. Women's suffrage had not realized its promise either.

Worst of all, the split in the ranks of the former suffragists, and the ensuing bitter struggles between the sponsors of the Equal Rights Amendment and the devoted defenders of special protection for women workers, had left feminism in the possession of the National Woman's Party, thus discrediting it in the eyes of the other side. The term and its concepts had taken on distasteful connotations and were actually disavowed by women in public life who were still deeply concerned with women's issues.<sup>4</sup> Many of the former suffragists, too, had been exhausted by the red-baiting attacks of the twenties on women active in the pacifist, labor, and social welfare causes. And by the forties even the younger suffrage veterans were advancing in age.

Women intellectuals, adopting the currently popular

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Susan Ware, Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal (Cambridge, 1981), 16.

economic interpretation of history, could even reject their crusading foremothers. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, whose parents had both been ardent feminists, in 1939 expressed mixed feelings in a reference to "the chip-on-the-shoulder attitude of the bold and free spirits in my mother's generation," whose work "to give women a fairer show in the activities of modern life," she said, had actually been unnecessary since economic forces would have brought about the same changes "without any help from feminists." Mary Beard, invited by the male president of Vassar to discuss her book On Understanding Women (1930) before a faculty meeting, was shocked by her reception. The "women teachers cried as if with one voice: 'The time has come to forget women! Now we are winning equality with men. We are becoming human beings.'"<sup>5</sup>

Two groups kept a remnant of feminism before the public in the long lull between the suffrage victory in 1919 and the gathering of new forces in the 1960s. The hard core of National Woman's Party veterans single-mindedly persisted in their advocacy of the Equal Rights Amendment, making few converts but keeping up their political connections. Another more fragmented group concentrated on promoting women's history, by writing and by

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5 Fisher to Harry Emerson Fosdick, May 16, 1939, in Mary Beard Collection, Schlesinger Library; Ann J. Lane, Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook (New York, 1977), 56.



building collections of historical materials.

Rosika Schwimmer appears to have taken the first steps toward the safeguarding of records. A refugee from Hungary with papers in her possession documenting feminist struggles in early twentieth-century Europe, Schwimmer gave Mary Beard the idea of a world center for women's archives.<sup>6</sup> Miriam Holden, a National Woman's Party adherent, collected printed works about women of all countries. By giving her papers to Radcliffe College, Maud Wood Park, who had directed the Congressional suffrage lobby in the last, ultimately victorious years, provided the foundation for today's Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library. Mary Beard played a part in the early history of both this repository and the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College.

Women's history continued to find readers. The momentum of the suffrage movement carried over into the early thirties. Alice Ames Winter retired from the presidency of the General Federation of Women's Clubs to write The Heritage of Women (1927), a popular survey of western civilization bonded by a sense of women's kinship, past and present. National Woman's Party activist Inez Haynes Irwin produced the more strident Angels and Amazons for the National Council of Women's observance of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair.

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara K. Turoff, Mary Beard as Force in History (Dayton, Ohio, 1979), 52.