



MAKING WOMEN'S HISTORY

The Essential
Mary Ritter Beard

Edited and with a New Preface by Ann J. Lane

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Without a sizable body of papers, it became necessary to rely upon many individuals to provide me with a sense of Mary Ritter Beard and the world she knew. Merle Curti read the manuscript and offered me both his criticisms of it and his memories of Charles and Mary Beard. Patricia A. Graham gave me vivid descrip-

tions of life in central Indiana, based upon her own family's history, and in so doing helped me understand in very important ways the kind of world in which Mary Ritter developed. Mary Beth Norton, happily for me, grew up on the DePauw University campus, as the child of a member of the faculty, and she reconstructed for me, in very personal and meaningful ways, the quality of life there in the recent past. Dora Edinger, a longtime co-worker of Mary Beard, on the *Encyclopedia Britannica* project as well as others, spoke to me at length about her recollections and gave me all the pertinent documents in her possession. Catherine McCord of Greencastle, Indiana, who graduated from DePauw University two classes after Mary Ritter, was a member of the same sorority, and has been intimately connected to the University ever since, was a source of enormously important descriptions of life on the college campus; she was also able to locate an early photograph of Mary Ritter. Dorothy Ritter Russo, Mary Beard's niece, a resident of Indianapolis, gave me many delightful hours of nostalgic recollections of her family. Clifton J. Phillips, whose effort to write a biography of Charles Beard was ultimately abandoned, as were attempts by others, provided me with materials he had accumulated. Reverend Arthur Neuerman, of the Central Avenue United Methodist Church of Indianapolis, graciously opened the church's archives to me.

As the children of Charles and Mary Beard, William Beard and Miriam Beard Vagts brought a singular kind of perspective to their reading of the manuscript. As scholars, they were also able to examine and comment upon the study from the viewpoint of trained historians. While I did not always accept their advice, I always paid careful attention to it. Their assistance and cooperation greatly helped me.

I also relied upon many friends. Barbara Sicherman, Claire Sprague, Dolores Kreisman, and the late Warren I. Susman read the entire manuscript and provided valuable criticisms and suggestions.

Gerda Lerner, friend and colleague, spent many hours, often on Sundays, reading the manuscript at every stage and commenting closely on it. I am very grateful to her for the time she gave to me and for the high quality of her criticisms. I benefited greatly from her long-standing interest in Mary Ritter Beard.

Rolando R. Lopez brought his special skills as an investigator and his talents as a writer to help me re-create the form of Mary Beard's personality and thought from tenuous and shadowy clues. He generously took time away from his own writing to work with every draft and every idea until he became as much a part of Mary Ritter Beard's life and world as did I.

Preface to the Feminist Press Edition

In the mid-1980s I contributed an essay on Mary Ritter Beard to Dale Spender's collection *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Women's Intellectual Traditions*.¹ I said at the time that Beard's thesis that women are a powerful but unrecognized force in history parallels her own life: her work is powerful but she is inadequately recognized. I had said much the same in my introductory remarks in the original printing of *this* book six years earlier, in 1977. Then, in 1988, in the preface to the first reprint of this volume, I pondered why her status remained little changed. Now it is 1998 and not a great deal has altered concerning Beard's reputation and acceptance by the feminist community, and I still wonder why.

Having read little of Beard myself in a while, I went back again to see what there was about her that so attracted and impressed me (and apparently did The Feminist Press, though too few others—hopefully, until now). It was easy to sustain my very high assessment of the quality of her work and its significance for us today.

In preparation for this new preface I also looked again at the collection of twenty-one feminist thinkers Dale Spender valued sufficiently to include in the volume that contains my essay on Beard. Here are sixteen, most of whom are recognized by most of us: Aphra Behn, Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Margaret Fuller, Lucy Stone, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Josephine Butler, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, Olive Schreiner, Christabel Pankhurst, Alice Paul, Virginia Woolf, Vera Brittain, and Simone de Beauvoir.

The remaining five, whom most of us don't know, are Barbara Bodichon, Hedwig Dohm, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Vida Goldstein, and Mary Ritter Beard. Well, obviously, I know Beard, and so do my friends and many others, but my graduate students—my feminist graduate students—do not, and they are my yardstick, at least for the American and English feminists. I did not expect graduate students working in U.S. history necessarily to know about historical figures from Australia and

Germany, so I asked my feminist colleagues from several disciplines, and they did not know any of the first four either, although a few of the historians recognized Fawcett's name but knew nothing about her.

I have now re-read the essays about those four to see if I could find some explanation, common to all, that would solve the puzzle now confronting me: Dale Spender had found them important and influential enough to be included in her select volume, yet many of those who would buy the book—at least in the United States—failed even to recognize their names. Perhaps I would discover a clue to why Mary Beard has remained unrecognized by many people I believe should know about her and her work.²

I have read some of the work of each of these overlooked feminist leaders, writers, activists, and I am persuaded by their work and by the essays about them that they were all important contributors to our shared legacy. I do not know why we know some of our foremothers and not others, not these four. One was Australian, another German, and that may explain part of the neglect here. One of the Englishwomen wrote little, and it is by their written work, and not their acts, that we come to know most of our forebears. Perhaps it is chance, dependent upon who happens to be discovered by contemporary writers.

Perhaps, after all, it does not much what becomes of specific individuals—who is forgotten and lost, and who is remembered and revered. But I think it does. One hundred years from now, who among the thousands of activists, writers, outspoken and significant feminist lawyers, political figures, scholars, and artists will be remembered? Will those choices of who remains or disappears be wise, thoughtful, and just? Will those who disappear come back at another time, when they perhaps “fit” better? Whatever the reasons for these four esteemed and impressive women to be little known to us—or at least to the friends and colleagues I asked—today, they offer no clues to understanding the invisibility of Mary Ritter Beard.

To demonstrate Beard's limited influence during the last thirty years, let us look at the pitifully small historiographical work she has elicited—here and now, instead of relegating such a list to a footnote or an appendix at the end, as is customarily done. What follows is a complete bibliography, arranged chronologically.

Berenice A. Carroll. “Mary Beard's *Woman as Force in History*: A Critique.” *Massachusetts Review* (1972). Reprinted in *Liberating Women's History*, edited by Berenice Carroll, 26–41, Urbana: University

of Illinois Press, 1976.

Carl N. Degler. "Woman as Force in History by Mary Beard." *Daedalus* (winter 1974).

Loretta Zimmerman. "Mary Beard: An Activist of the Progressive Era." *University of Portland Review* 26 (spring 1974).

Barbara Kivel Turoff. "Mary Beard: Feminist Educator." *Antioch Review* (1979).

Bonnie G. Smith. "Seeing Mary Beard." *Feminist Studies* 10, no. 3 (1984).

Nancy F. Cott. "How Weird Was Beard? Mary Ritter Beard and American Feminism." Paper presented at the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Wellesley College, June 1987.

Nancy F. Cott. "Two Beards: Coauthorship and the Concept of Civilization." *American Quarterly* 42 (June 1990).

Nancy F. Cott, ed. *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991.

Mary Trigg. "'To Work Together for Ends Larger Than Self': The Feminist Struggles of Mary Beard and Doris Stevens in the 1930s." *The Journal of Women's History* 6, no. 4 (winter/spring 1995).

And that's it.

In the early 1970s I was interviewed for a grant by the staff of the American Association of University Women. I met with three college-educated, older women whose only connection to the academy was through the organization they represented. They were not academics, and they were not scholars, but they all knew of and had read extensively in the work of Mary Ritter Beard. They read Beard while they were in college during the 1920s and 1930s and they kept up with Beard's continuing scholarship. They had read *Woman as Force in History*, although my eminent professors at Columbia had not. They understood her major theses about women in history and agreed with them. We had a splendid afternoon conversation discussing Beard's work and its implications for the contemporary women's movement. A new edition of *Woman as Force in History* had been published in 1971 and again in 1973. We talked about Berenice Carroll's essay on it that had just appeared in the *Massachusetts Review*. Two years later came Carl Degler's appraisal of the same book in *Daedalus*. Bonnie Smith in 1984 and Nancy Cott—whose work on Beard begins in the late 1980s and concludes with her splendid edition of the letters—speak to the largeness of Beard's vision. A

few other scholars—Loretta Zimmerman in the mid-1970s, Barbara Turoff in the late 1970s, and Mary Trigg most recently, in 1995—explore her political activities in the Progressive Era through the 1930s.

So what is the explanation, or explanations? Why has Mary Beard not caught on? *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* is the culmination of Beard's forty years of writing and acting on behalf of women and women's place in history and society. It is her most famous, perhaps only famous, book. But it is not gracefully written, as some of her earlier writings were. It is not an easy book to enjoy for that reason. She packed it all in, summed up everything she had learned and wanted us to know, but it is difficult to read. Students, even graduate students, have trouble with it, not because of Beard's ideas, but because of the expression of them. That is not a reason not to read it, but it may be a reason why it has not been read.

By the time she wrote *Woman as Force in History*, Beard had spent decades trying various strategies in an effort to engage the world in her ideas, but she knew how little success she had achieved until then. She was seventy years old. She was tired and exasperated. She put it all together in what she assumed would be her final work—and it was, except for an extended essay about Charles Beard. To know the breadth and depth of the work Mary Beard left behind we must read beyond the one book. That is part of the problem, and one I tried to address in this collection.

Beard may also be spurned by feminists of the last three decades because she seems not to be engaged in two of the central issues of these times: the tension between equality and difference and the tension between agency and victimization. It is true that these issues held little interest for her in her lifetime, and my suspicion is that they would hold little today. I imagine that Beard would find those ideological struggles to be false dichotomies which would not resonate with the reality of the world she inhabited and wrote about.

If she had to be placed somewhere in the equality/difference debate, she would be a difference feminist, which would have perplexed her. She created her work as a response to what she saw as the one-sidedness of the "equality" feminists of her day. She saw women's voice and women's role as distinct and different and strong and unacknowledged. At the same time, Beard fully believed that men and women should inhabit the world equally.

Similarly, the second tension dividing the feminist scholarly community, victimization versus agency, would, I believe, have struck Beard as

another distinction without a difference. She focussed on agency but she was well aware of victimization. She was compensating for what she saw as an undue emphasis on one side that would undermine women's sense of strength and empowerment. The subject she selected to explore shaped what side of these tensions she described and analyzed. Some historical events reflect victimization, others agency, just as some reveal the need for equality, some the need to recognize difference. Since the feminists of her day concentrated on oppression, she wished to offset the imbalance by stressing the centuries of power and influence that women had had and still have, while recognizing that much of that power and influence has been different from men's and therefore not acknowledged, not even noticed—not even by most of the feminists. Those feminists who stress women as subject and oppressed are wrong, Beard believed, and more important, they persuade women to accept that designation of themselves and their pasts, with the result that women's collective strength is undermined. Such a point of view can lend itself, although Beard did not mean it so, to those present-day anti-feminists, cherished by the media, who claim that women have already achieved equality. Beard does not belong in that ideo-logical camp. She objected to the simple-minded slogans of many of the militant feminists of her time who called for absolute equality, thus, she believed, denying the power and force of the total community of women and denying the existence and value of a distinct female culture.³

Some years ago a colleague asked me a question no one ever had before. How did it feel, she asked, to go from one feminist intellectual who saw woman's power and agency as central in history to another who saw our oppression and victimization as central—a reference to my work on Charlotte Perkins Gilman. That question, which I pondered then, and on and off through the years, provides some of the clues to my central question: why has Mary Beard's extraordinary analysis of women in history, offered over a period of thirty years in seven books and hundreds of articles, had so little impact on feminist thinkers and activists during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and/or in the subsequent decades of backlash? In probing this question I also have come to understand why it has been so difficult for me to understand her limited influence.

Beard did not see history as a struggle between agency and victimization or between equality and difference. She saw history as embodying all aspects of social relations in complex interaction. The answer to

what mode of action predominated depended on the particular questions the historian asked. If she highlighted what appears to be agency and difference, it is because she believed these points of view were inadequately understood. Since it is a view I share with Beard, very much because of her impact on me through her writings, I had difficulty understanding why contemporary feminists do not appreciate her relevance for the present.

Mary Beard was a highly sophisticated and trained historian. All of her writings—the social, intellectual, and cultural history as well as the theoretical work—reflect her training. It is the product of a historian and is thus grounded in traditional historical investigation. Mary Beard wrote history very much as her male contemporaries wrote history. The central difference—and its importance cannot be underestimated—was that she concentrated her vision on women, and that changed everything. Such an approach does, however, locate her in a very different place from contemporary feminist theorists. Historian Joan Wallach Scott is probably the most successful theorist from the discipline of history who has moved furthest beyond it, sitting more comfortably than most historians do within contemporary feminist theory. Even some of her work, considered a bit far out by some feminist historians, is considerably less abstract and more historical than that of most theorists.

Mary Beard did not “do” theory the way feminist theorists do it today. Her theory flowed more from a nineteenth-century tradition of European and American thinkers: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Olive Schreiner, and John Dewey, among others, who, it should be noted, were also not historians. Beard’s true descendant is Gerda Lerner, more than any other contemporary scholar. In the collection *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*, an interdisciplinary reader containing selections from a wide range of past and present feminist writers, there is one reference to Mary Beard, and it is in the selection by Gerda Lerner:

Mary Beard was the first to point out that the ongoing and continuing contribution of women to the development of human culture cannot be found by treating them only as victims of oppression.⁴

Beard’s theories are grounded in history, primarily but not exclusively focussed on women. Her work is not abstract or obscure. It is rooted in the history in which she was steeped and it is rooted in the political and intellectual activities in which she was engaged. Her theory is a

creation of a highly developed, historical world view, not a philosophical, literary, or anthropological reconceptualization of reality.

Think of some of the major feminist theorists we read today from a range of perspectives: Catherine MacKinnon, Heidi Hartman, Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Juliette Mitchell, Donna Haraway, Barbara Smith, Patricia Williams. Add your own favorites to the list. The theoretical work of the feminist movement of the last period has, with few exceptions, come from disciplines other than history.

There are other reasons for the neglect of Beard. Many young feminists have come to women's history and feminist theory as established academic fields, and it is hard for them to imagine a time—although it was not so long ago—when women's history and feminist theory did not have a place in the academy. For these young feminists, Beard's originality and creativity might be difficult to recognize. In the first sentence of her entry on Mary Beard in *Notable American Women, The Modern Period*, Nancy Cott described Beard as providing "an intellectual foundation for women's history."³ A few predecessors wrote historical accounts of women in society but none had a sense of history and women's place in it as sweeping, as global, or as systematic as Mary Beard's, the first trained woman historian writing the history of women. When we read Beard at all, and some still do, we read her as we read Mary Wollstonecraft or Simone de Beauvoir—as forebears, not to study and incorporate her ideas into our work. Contemporary feminists, including feminist historians, read across disciplines, not back in them, and so we have only a sketchy and inadequate knowledge of the historical traditions from which we come.

Now in the new century with this edition, it is clear that even historians in the academy read less and less historiography in general, even in graduate schools. What was once a standard course for undergraduate majors and graduate students, certainly in history, has disappeared from many colleges and universities. Charles Beard, the far better known of the couple, is himself becoming a dim memory to current crops of graduate students. Thus, even feminist graduate students in history—the place where Mary Beard should be known, if only as her husband's co-author of major U.S. texts—find her name unfamiliar.

Mary Beard's direct legacy *can* be seen clearly in the new research on women and politics. *Women, the State and Welfare*, a fine collection edit-

ed by Linda Gordon and published in 1991, is replete with articles that are direct descendants of the kind of work Beard called for and the kind of work she herself did, although with little recognition of her impact or her existence.⁶ Beard's early writings came from her personal experiences in the political arena. After dropping out of graduate school, which provided her with good training and a permanent dislike of the pretensions of the university world, Beard entered politics, participating as an activist and writer. She began publishing while still deeply involved in politics. Beard's first book, *Woman's Work in Municipalities*, appeared in 1915; the second, *A Short History of the American Labor Movement*, in 1920. All the other written work she published by herself dealt with women centrally, with the exception of a long essay, *The Making of Charles A. Beard*.

I have divided the selections in *Mary Ritter Beard* into conceptual categories. Under the listing "Political Activism—The Early Years" I illustrate some of her early concerns: votes for workingwomen, especially mothers; the legislative influence of unenfranchised women; society's unwillingness to recognize women heroes and their contributions; the strength of the Congressional Union, the organization formed by Alice Paul with the active support of Beard, patterned after the political position of the British suffrage movement; and a selection from *Woman's Work in Municipalities*, a book that details the kinds of community activities ordinarily undertaken by groups of women.⁷

Following the selections cited above from Beard's early years, the second section of *Mary Ritter Beard*, "Feminism as a World View—Theory," represents the maturing intellectual as she moved beyond day-to-day politics to reflections on what it all means, projecting onto a larger screen, going back in time and across the ocean to England to find the answers she sought. It is this section that includes an excerpt from *Woman as Force in History*.

But what Beard was trying to accomplish seemed not to be understood. Her books apparently did not sufficiently engage the imagination and activity of women. Perhaps, she felt, women needed some real demonstration of their importance and the value of their history. Believing that knowledge derives from our actions upon the world, she undertook more practical experiments, and they are included in the final section of this collection, "Feminism as a World View—Practice." Beginning in January 1936, she spent five years establishing, organizing, financing, and publicizing what came to be known as the World Center for Women's Archives, a clearinghouse of information on the history of women.

In an effort to reach the growing numbers of college women, she also created the first women's studies syllabus ever written, although she was never able to persuade any college administrator to accept it. And finally, she convinced the editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to finance a small group, headed by Beard, to critique each article in the current edition of the *Britannica* and to offer suggestions for subjects not included. The report, written by Beard, remains, but the critique was never accepted or incorporated into later editions.

Projects like the archive and the encyclopedia brought together the various strands of Beard's life and work. She began as an activist in women's politics, and then moved into writing major tomes on the subject of women in history and society; but she discovered ways to embody many of her intellectual notions into activist projects, some of which are unknown even to those familiar with *Woman as Force in History*.

There probably are those who conclude that Mary Ritter Beard is forgotten by many because she deserves to be. I urge those skeptics to spend an hour meandering through this volume. In the last thirty years, women as a community have come to understand the enormous damage to which we have been subject through centuries by the denial of our history as part of world knowledge. Since then much has been accomplished in recapturing and recreating a great deal of that past. But as long as we in the feminist community continue to relegate Mary Ritter Beard to the margin, we continue to suffer that loss.

Maybe we need to look at the peculiarities of the publishing world. This book was originally published by Schocken Books as part of the Studies in the Life of Women series. Soon after the book appeared, the series ended and the commitment to the book was largely abandoned. Several years later an enthusiastic woman editor at Northeastern University Press persuaded the senior editor to reissue the book. As frequently happens now in the publishing industry, the editor who had championed the book left soon after it appeared, and with her went the interest of the publisher. Mary Beard never gave up, and I guess I have been inspired by her determination. But now I think the long journey is at an end. The past mercurial history will not plague this edition at The Feminist Press. Mary Ritter Beard has finally found a genuine and permanent home, and her own words return to encourage and hearten us: "nothing can kill an idea."

Ann J. Lane
May 2000

NOTES

1. Dale Spender, ed., *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Key Women Thinkers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

2. Barbara Bodichon, an Englishwoman who lived from 1827 to 1891, was an activist who spent most of her adult life in projects directed toward social change. She wrote little—a few pamphlets, articles in the *English Women's Journal*, diaries, and letters to friends. Bodichon was well known at the time, but “has all but disappeared from history,” wrote Jacquie Matthews, the author of the essay in Spender’s collection, a teacher of women’s studies and French at Victoria University in New Zealand who was at the time completing a biography of Bodichon.

In 1873, Hedwig Dohm (1833–1919) was the first woman in Germany to seek the vote. A Berliner, she was a prolific writer of essays, theoretical work, and fiction who identified with radical feminism. Yet Dohm was so shy that she never spoke in public or participated in women’s activist groups. She has been erased from history, says Renate Duelli-Klein, author of the essay about her, because she “did not conveniently fit any one category” (Spender 178). Little of her work has been translated into English, an explanation for her limited reputation here, but even in Germany today the women’s movement knows little about her.

Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847–1929) was described in her obituaries as the “Mother of Women’s Suffrage” in England and the “embodiment of sweet reason,” clearly juxtaposing her to the Pankhursts, who were known for their window-smashing and aggressive disruptions but who are well known today. In addition to being an influential activist, Fawcett wrote a great deal, beginning in 1870 with *Political Economy for Beginners*, which went almost immediately into ten editions, and ending in 1924 with her autobiography, called *What I Remember*.

The last of the four is Vida Goldstein (1869–1949) an important and neglected Australian feminist, says the author of the entry about her in Spender’s collection, Gaby Weiner, an English feminist and lecturer on women’s studies who was at the time writing a biography about Harriet Martineau. Goldstein, who traveled and spoke widely in the United States and England, was a leader of the suffrage movement in her country, and publisher and editor of a monthly paper, “The Australian Women’s Sphere.”

3. An enormous body of work has emerged on the difference/equality and agency/victim battlegrounds. Jane Roland Martin’s “Methodological Essentialism, False Difference and Other Dangerous Traps,” *Signs* 19, no. 3

(spring 1994) is the article I return to frequently; it remains, for me, the wisest statement on the subject.

4. Gerda Lerner, selection from *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, in *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*, edited by Maggie Humm (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Reprinted from Lerner's book *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

5. Nancy F. Cott, "Mary Ritter Beard," *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, edited by Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980).

6. Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State and Welfare* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

7. Paula Baker's classic article, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920," included in Gordon's *Women, the State and Welfare*, has a reference to Beard's *Women's Work*. Linda Gordon's own piece, "Family Violence, Feminism and Social Control," refers to a revival of a "Beardian tradition," by which she means the recognition of women's activity (180). Both are signs that at least two of the twelve scholars remember Mary Beard, if only in passing. A younger scholar, Rebecca Edwards, in her brilliant recent study of gender in American party politics, *Angels in the Machinery*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) reflects a strong, if unrecognized, lineage to Beard. There certainly are scholars, but primarily senior scholars, who know Beard's work, but many younger feminist writers are not aware of their debt to her or how fruitfully they might read her and benefit from her provocative insights today.

8. During this period, Beard also produced a work on women in Japan. In the immediate post-World War II era, when her husband was invited to Japan, Beard accompanied him there and conducted her own research. She uses what she learned in a short time about women in Japanese history as a further illustration of her thesis.

Part One.

**Mary Ritter Beard:
An Appraisal of Her Life and Work**