"The best one-volume history of American women to date"
—Gerda Lerner

BORN *for* LIBERTY

A History of Women in America

SARA M. EVANS

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Born for Liberty

In memory of my grandmothers,
Sallie Baker Everett
and
Mary Ligon Evans

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Born for liberty, disdaining to bear the irons of a tyrannic Government. . . . Our ambition is kindled by the fame of those heroines of antiquity, who have rendered their sex illustrious, and have proved to the universe, that, if the weakness of our Constitutions, if opinion and manners did not forbid us to march to glory by the same paths as the Men, we should at least equal, and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good.

—*Sentiments of an American Woman*
PHILADELPHIA, 1780

Acknowledgments

Fifteen years ago, when I began to teach women's history, the field had only a handful of books. No standard text gave women more than a few lines (usually about suffragists) and maybe an illustration or two. Since 1974 I have watched the eagerness of students for whom women's history is a constant revelation, generating simultaneous pride and anger. And each year the resources available have become richer. Without the impressive body of scholarship on women produced in the last two decades I could not have written *Born for Liberty.* Standing on the shoulders of so many colleagues I admire, I am humbled by the debt while also aware that many will disagree with some or all of what I have done with this material. It is an honor simply to participate in the conversation.

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Introduction

In the last two decades there have been dramatic changes in women's visibility at every level of American life—politics, the labor force, popular culture—accompanied by important shifts in women's perceptions of their own potential. This new visibility sparked a reconsideration of the history they had been told. Women wanted to know about their past. Indeed, they found it difficult to envision future changes without some grounding in a history that included their experience. Yet the only images available consisted of brief references to suffragists or mythic but relatively inconsequential figures like Betsy Ross. Most women still know very little of the female experience in the past, remaining spectators in popular versions of both past and present. Yet the stories they demanded are being unearthed in ever-greater numbers. There has never been a better time for American women to claim the possibilities for full democratic participation in political and social life that their history reveals. To do so, however, requires a retelling of their history that explores women's hardships as well as their achievements and places their stories within the broader context of our nation's history.

The virtual invisibility of women to historians was no oversight. When history is conceived as a narrative of public (primarily political) action, its arena is a stage from which women have traditionally been excluded. The ideological power of that exclusion in turn fostered a double standard; women were ignored regardless of their political importance. The new social history of the last two decades has introduced an amazing pluralism into traditionally defined history by exploring the experiences of women, blacks,

family life, factory workers, and immigrants. Now we have many histories, and the historian's task is to integrate these experiences into the dominant narrative of the American past, the main story we tell ourselves about who we have been as a nation.[1]

That story is characterized by a set of ideas perceived by many as a unique gift of American political culture. These ideas include a deep belief in popular sovereignty, in an active and "virtuous" citizenry, and in the importance of "independence" based on having enough property to allow one to look beyond narrow self-interest to the common good. Rooted in English political history and in the classical republicanism of ancient Greece and Rome, and brought to life by the debates over independence, the themes of popular sovereignty, civic virtue, and personal autonomy took dramatic hold in North America in a way different from the rest of the industrializing world. The pluralism of American society required republican principles to expand and adapt to new circumstances and institutions. As classical republicanism mingled with evangelical Protestantism and Enlightenment liberalism, it brought forth a new formulation of active public life blending unique and indigenous elements with traditions shared with Western Europe.

The rhetoric surrounding the American Revolution, rooted in classical Greek assumptions, presumed a sharp dichotomy between public and private. According to philosopher Hannah Arendt, the public was the realm of politics, where citizens who commanded independent resources and private households gathered as peers to debate the future of the community. This political realm was also the exclusive locus of freedom, an arena for action through which individuals made themselves visible using persuasive speech and seeking public recognition of their achievements. Also essential to an active, vital "public" was a strong sense of "virtue," the responsibility of being concerned about community affairs. By contrast, the private domain was not concerned with the issues of constructing a common world but rather with maintaining life, with necessity and species survival (producing food and bearing children). Precisely because women and slaves devoted themselves to the necessities of life, male heads of households had the freedom to engage in politics.[2] According to political philosopher Jean Bethke Elstain, "The flip side of a coin that features the public-spirited visage of the male citizen and dutiful father is the profile

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of the loving, virtuous, chaste, selfless wife. . . . Without someone to tend the hearth, the legislative halls would grow silent and empty, or become noisily corrupt."[3]

Although initially outside the public arena where politics and citizenship had meaning and specificity, American women effectively reshaped the boundaries of that arena in ways that have not been explored. In doing so they changed the meaning of public life itself. American women did this over a long period of time while simultaneously shaping and adapting their own private sphere, the family, to changing times. By pioneering in the creation of new public spaces—voluntary associations located *between* the public world of politics and work and the private intimacy of family—women made possible a new vision of active citizenship unlike the original vision based on the worlds of small farmers and artisans. Women's vision is an integral part of our nation's distinctive democratic political culture.

The story of women's struggle to situate themselves in the public and civic life of American society is filled with ironies. It forces us to think hard about the slippery definitions of "public" and "private," "male" and "female" over the course of four centuries. During the colonial period, for example, a participatory public life had begun to emerge in the practices of self-government, as town meetings and colonial assemblies developed in small settlements along the Atlantic coast. There were sharp rhetorical distinctions between that narrowly defined "public," from which women were excluded, and the privacy of familial domesticity. The realities of seventeenth-century life, however, allocated to the family many activities and responsibilities—such as education, business activities, and health and welfare—that we now associated with public life and institutions. As a result, political and religious activities remained highly personalized, more like kinship than the impersonal relationships associated with twentieth-century public life, because people knew one another in multiple ways in small communities. For example, the tanner from whom one bought leather could also be a cousin, neighbor, elder in the church, and colonial assembly member. Thus, even though women were excluded from most formal public roles, they had access to private sources of social control over public action. The most powerful example were Iroquois women who, unlike their colonial counterparts, could act as a group to nominate council elders and veto appoint-

ments of chiefs. The most extreme example is the women of Salem, Massachusetts; as accused witches, accusers, and witnesses, these women held an entire colony in thrall for months.

The Revolution gave new political meaning to domestic life, raising the role of women to a problematic status in the new political order—a status that has persisted to the present. Public life was the formal realm of "freedom," the arena in which achievement and excellence could receive recognition. Shut out as this realm expanded dramatically in the nineteenth century, women responded by creating a different form of public life. In different ways and to different degrees, virtually every group of women—middle class, immigrant, black, and working class—used voluntary associations to express their interests and to organize for public activity. This allowed public expression of private perspectives and values often at odds with those of a male, upper-class elite. It also sustained and gave political power to certain moral values like compassion and fairness that were eroding in the dominant political culture.

From their earliest roles as helpmates in family economies, to the republican motherhood of the revolutionary era, to the female politics of nineteenth-century reform, to contemporary struggles to define women's public roles and the meaning of gender equality, American women have continually challenged and redefined the boundaries of public and private life. They have demanded public attention and action on issues that arise first in the domestic arena—issues such as health, education, and poverty. They have entered public work by laboring for wages outside the home even though by the nineteenth century being a wage earner had become an integral part of the cultural definitions of both "public" and "manliness." Women created female professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work, making public roles which originated in domesticity. They developed a distinctively American form of public life through voluntary associations that made the vision of active citizenship a sustainable one even as economic individualism on the one hand, and massive bureaucracies on the other, eroded the original Jeffersonian dream of an independent and virtuous yeomanry.

Such an achievement cannot be underestimated, as it holds the possibility for a continual reworking of the democratic dream in the face of the stark realities of great inequality of wealth and power. Since the early nineteenth century, both female and male

voluntary associations have been a fundamental aspect of American life. Through them women brought concerns rooted in domesticity into the public arena, forcing changes in the definition of the state with ironic consequences. As the welfare state assumed responsibilities previously relegated to the family, it also reduced the arenas for active citizenship and enforced traditional gender roles in an often intrusive and impersonal way.[4] Yet women's voluntary activities which shaped this development also honed an essential tool for regenerating civic participation, one used over and over by groups outside the mainstream of American life. The powerful, if little recognized, consequences of this development make more poignant the traditional relegation of women to the invisibility of the private realm. Recognizing the crucial importance of active civic participation clarifies the costs of exclusion both for women themselves and for society.

The unexamined nature of this problem can be traced in part to the failure of feminist theorists and historians to confront the distinctive nature of public life and the meaning of citizenship.[5] Feminist historians have devoted themselves primarily to tracing out the dimensions of women's worlds—the work they did, the organizations they built with other women, and changing ideologies about gender. With a few key exceptions, these historians have avoided the study of politics, accepting the cultural definition of politics as male, or they have seen women's political action in instrumental terms, as means to other ends, not as a distinctive activity in its own right.[6] Similarly feminist theorists have tended to sideline any consideration of the nature of public life and female citizenship in favor of a focus on "female values" rooted in the private realm and in reproduction. Thus, although much of the evidence we need has been gathered, the broader patterns remain to be sketched out.

Historian Mary Beard, writing in the 1940s, called women a "force in history." To understand the force of women's experience, we need to transform the traditional stage of public life and history by taking as central what was previously understood to be a backdrop or an unnoticed stage prop. We must adjust our vision so that we can see the world not only through the major male figures in the foreground but also through the eyes of female figures: a Puritan goodwife, an African slave, an Iroquois matron, a westering woman, a female immigrant, a settlement house worker, a secretary. We need to see the household and daily work of middle-

class women and migrant workers, of domestics and factory hands; the changing experiences of labor and childbirth; the statistical realities of fertility and mortality; and the female spaces of clubs, benevolent associations, and settlement houses. Then, and only then, can we understand how these stories, so diverse among themselves, affected and transformed the dynamic interplay of public and private life in our past and how the experience of women in America actively shaped the broader history that we, women and men, all claim as our own. Only then can we begin to imagine what it will really mean for women to be *citizens,* full participants in the decision-making process that shapes our future.

1

The First American Women

According to the Iroquois, the creation of the earth began when a woman came from heaven and fluttered above the sea, unable to find a resting place for her feet. The fish and animals of the sea, having compassion on her, debated in council about which of them should help her. The tortoise offered his back, which became the land, and the woman made her home there. A spirit noticed her loneliness and with her begot three children to provide her company. The quarrels of her two sons can still be heard in the thunder. But her daughter became the mother of the great nations of the Iroquois.[1]

Women appear frequently at the cosmic center of native-American myths and legends, tales that are undoubtedly very ancient. The history of women on the North American continent began 20,000 years ago with the migration of people from the Asian continent across the land bridge that now is the Bering Strait. These early ancestors of contemporary native Americans gradually created a great diversity of cultures as they adapted to varied environmental circumstances and conditions over time. The archaeological record indicates that 2,000 years ago some North American cultures lived nomadically, hunting and gathering plants and animals. Others settled in villages and subsisted on domesticated plants as well as wild resources. Still others built complex, hierarchically organized societies centered in relatively large cities or towns. In these latter groups, archaeological remains reveal widespread trade relations and religious systems uniting people over vast areas of the continent. When the first Europeans reached North America in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there

were some 2,000 native American languages in use, a cultural diversity that made Europe look homogeneous.[2]

Gatherers and Nurturers, Traders and Shamans

Among the peoples of North America whose tribes lived in the woods, along the rivers, and on the edges of the plains, women were essential to group survival. In a subsistence economy, daily life revolved around finding food for the next meal or, at the most, the next season. Women's work as gatherers and processors of food and as nurturers of small children was not only visible to the whole community, but it also shaped ritual life and processes of community decision making.

Women's activities were sharply divided from those of men in most Indian societies. Women gathered seeds, roots, fruits, and other wild plants. And in horticultural groups they cultivated crops such as corn, beans, and squash. Women were also typically responsible for cooking, preserving foods, and making household utensils and furnishings. In addition, they built and maintained dwellings, such as earth or bark lodges and tepees, and associated household facilities like storage pits, benches, mats, wooden racks, and scaffolds. In groups that moved on a seasonal basis, women were often responsible for transporting all household goods from one location to the next.

Male activities in many groups centered on hunting and warfare. After the hunts, Indian women played an important role in processing the hides of deer or buffalo into clothing, blankets, floor coverings, tepees, or trade goods; preserving the meat; and manufacturing a variety of bone implements from the remains of the animals.

Indian societies differed in their definitions of which tasks were appropriate for women or men and in their degree of flexibility or rigidity. In some groups people would be ridiculed and shamed for engaging in tasks inappropriate for their gender, while other groups were more tolerant. Sometimes men and women performed separate, but complementary tasks. Among the Iroquois, for example, men cleared the fields so women could plant them. In other cases men and women performed the same tasks but the work was still segregated on the basis of sex. For example, many Plains Indian tribes divided the task of tanning hides according to the animal, some being assigned exclusively to women, others to men.

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