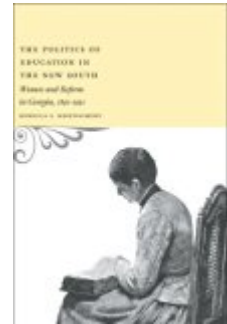


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Rebecca S. Montgomery. *The Politics of Education in the New South: Women and Reform in Georgia, 1890-1930*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. 263 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3108-4.

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Reforming Women

The Politics of Education in the New South: Women and Reform in Georgia, 1890-1930 seeks to explain what motivated southern white women to undertake education reform in Progressive Era Georgia. In the process, historian Rebecca S. Montgomery uncovers the truly radical vision of gender roles undergirding the reformers' work. She examines women's efforts to change, expand, and improve women's higher education, rural public schools, extension services, and education in the mountains and in working-class neighborhoods through the establishment of kindergartens and mill schools. While Montgomery is not the first historian to study white southern women's reform efforts, her study is unique in its focus on women's understanding of household relations as the basis for their reform agenda.

Montgomery takes as her "starting point works that portray the social relations of the southern antebellum household as the model for, and indeed as the material basis of, power relations in the larger society" (p. 1). She argues that as elite and middle-class women struggled to gain more educational opportunities for women like themselves (primarily by demanding that southern universities open their doors to women), they also began to fight to improve training and economic opportunities for those women who earned their own living. To accomplish both of these goals, women reformers had to forge new household relations.

In the antebellum South, women's productive contributions to the household economy (as plantation mis-

tress or yeoman wife) were obscured by a slave system in which one's production did not necessarily lead to civil or political rights. In the aftermath of the Civil War, even when increasing numbers of white women sought wage work out of necessity, their economic value continued to be hidden by the symbolic place of white women in the home. White men resisted women's attempts to broaden their education and employment opportunities, arguing that such a move would betray traditional southern culture.

Montgomery first examines white women's desire for co-education in Georgia's public colleges and universities. As at other times when white women's attention to black civil rights caused them to reconsider their own situation, Montgomery reminds us that white women began agitating for greater access to education at the same time African Americans did. She highlights the northeastern education and connections of many clubwomen in Georgia who pushed for greater opportunities at home. She finds that white women wanted greater personal and professional growth, seeking both a classical education and professional training.

Co-education was a hot issue in the changing economy of the New South. Georgians realized that education could make the difference between those who struggled financially and those who survived. Elite women wanted to improve training for teachers and other working women. Significantly, they also argued that a liberal-arts education enabled women like themselves to develop

their full potential. While their campaign on behalf of working women was less controversial—men were willing to aid those unfortunate women—their efforts on their own behalf were more threatening because their self-actualization born in a classical education had the potential to reorder the household structure. Men resisted that challenge to subordination just as they resisted the growing independence of African Americans and their demands for full citizenship.

The Politics of Education in the New South then turns to white women's efforts to reform education for children. Georgia women wanted better teachers, longer school years, compulsory education, kindergartens, and other changes. The Georgia Federation of Women's Clubs began a model-school program, hoping to erect a model school in each county to demonstrate the benefits of progressive reform in the schools. Montgomery argues that women's demand for compulsory education suggested a new model of fatherhood: rather than a patriarchal vision that protected the rights of fathers to make decisions about their children's attendance, women pushed for a community vision that emphasized a father's duties to the greater good of the community through the education of his children.

Because many women reformers were just as racist as the white men in their state, clubwomen aimed their reform efforts at white children. Even those with more moderate racial views realized the danger such relative liberalism posed to the larger agenda. In their work with mountaineers, women emphasized the Anglo-Saxon racial purity of those living in the mountains. However, this work, too, challenged gender notions. Female school directors in many cases were single women taking on prominent public roles. Kindergarten teachers also were often single women, and married clubwomen forged strong bonds with the teachers, lobbying both on their behalf and alongside them.

Women reformers also showed signs of radical visions of a New South. Working in industrial schools for mill workers, they hoped not only to prepare workers to become a better-trained work force, but also to train them for opportunities beyond the mill. Women's clubs campaigned for mothers' pensions for widows or abandoned wives. Montgomery gives women due credit; she points out that although male politicians may not have taken these demands seriously, the women who made them did.

Montgomery contributes to the recent literature on women and Progressive Era reform by demonstrating that Georgia women did not generally push for women's

education rights based on municipal-housekeeping arguments, but instead argued that women had citizenship rights. Further, she highlights women reformers' ability to relate to other groups that they saw as equally powerless, such as mountaineers, and juxtaposes their desire for social control with their genuine empathy and understanding. The reformers' vision of citizenship and government was truly radical, according to Montgomery—they wanted to reform not only women's roles but also fatherhood and the male political system. They hoped to make men more involved in family and community life and to push politicians to enact a more activist state. They emphasized community obligation rather than individual rights. In order to do so, women reformers tried to expand the reach of the state.

The pioneering work of Anne Scott and Paula Baker, and the contributions of many subsequent historians, established the important role that women played in Progressive social reform and in the transformation of politics in the first decades of the twentieth century.[1] Montgomery builds on this scholarship by moving away from an emphasis on municipal housekeeping and focusing on the radical vision of gender roles underlying reformers' demand for an activist state.

While Montgomery recognizes that the work of these white women was circumscribed by the fact that African Americans were simultaneously working on many of the same issues, and that white men were anxious lest they lose both their racial and gender privileges, she keeps this book focused on white female reformers. A comparative study of both white and black education reform may have yielded further insights into white women's work and contributed to our understanding of African-American education reform, but it would have made for an unwieldy book given the amount of evidence Montgomery compiled for white women alone.

This is a brilliantly argued book that, though centered on a seemingly narrow slice of southern history, makes much larger claims about the nature of gender relations and reform in the South and in the nation. It is required reading for anyone interested in such topics.

Note

[1]. Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): pp. 620-647.

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