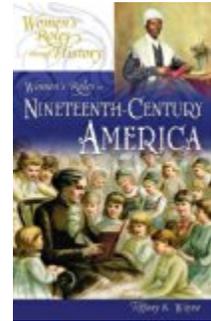


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tiffany K. Wayne. *Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007. x + 248 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-33547-1.

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A Thematic Overview of the Woman's Century

The Women's Roles through History series, to which this volume is the first American contribution, intends to form a "content-rich survey" of women's lives in various centuries and locales accessible to high-school students and the general public. Tiffany K. Wayne, of Cabrillo College in California, succeeds admirably in fulfilling the series's purpose. This thematic overview of women's history in nineteenth-century America is an engaging, quick-moving read. In a well-written account, with no dumbing-down of language or content, Wayne accounts for the major developments of the "woman's century," under headings that include marriage and family life; work; religion; education and the professions; politics and reform; slavery and the civil war; the west; and literature and the arts. She draws on up-to-date scholarship and analyses, and provides excellent endnotes and suggested reading lists for each chapter. Wayne balances narrative accounts with noteworthy and fun primary source excerpts and photographs. The book is bracketed by a meaningful timeline and a truly current, useful bibliography. It does not read like a textbook, but rather as a user-friendly work of synthetic scholarship which provides both a structured overview and a current and top-notch set of reading lists for students interested in women's history.

The strength of Wayne's approach lies in her inclusiveness. Wayne's synthesis is thorough, with a wide swath of nineteenth-century American women represented in each section. Wayne includes the events, persons, and issues which affected Catholic and Protestant women; enslaved, formerly enslaved and free African

American women; Native American women; immigrants; and women from various regions of the country. She describes the advances in women's rights and changes in women's roles as they affected elite, middle-, and lower-class women. She avoids the all-too-common problem of telling an upper-class, white, Northeastern version of history with other women's stories relegated to a "minority" section. Instead, by integrating the true variety of American women's experiences in her narrative, Wayne captures the period in a way monographs often cannot.

If there is any drawback to her approach it may be chronology. The book is structured thematically, with each chapter presenting a full account of one broad topic. Due to the geographic, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity contained in her narratives, the "clock" starts and stops a bit. Jumps in time are employed to provide the back-story for various groups and issues. Her helpful timeline helps mitigate the problem of chronology, but the thematic approach can tend to compress the nineteenth century into a blurred monolith. Also the thematic structure can create a minor amount of repetition, with Ann Lee's founding of the Shakers, for example, covered in both the chapter on "Marriage and Family Life" and the chapter on "Religion." However, the quick pacing of her writing, and the desirable breadth of the accounts she gives offsets these concerns.

Wayne focuses primarily on content-rich stories of everyday women, leaders and spokeswomen, and popular culture. Despite favoring content over theory, she

gives clear and accessible summaries of the ways scholars think about the nineteenth century. For example, in her chapter on marriage and family life, she introduces the move from eighteenth-century republican motherhood to the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity. She has a knack for including quotations which concisely sum up important concepts, like Catharine Beecher's perfect distillation of "separate spheres" in her 1841 *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*: "In no country has such constant care been taken, as in America, to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes, and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways which are always different.... If, on the one hand, an American woman cannot escape from the quiet circle of domestic employments, on the other hand, she is never forced to go beyond it" (quoted, p. 2). A quotation which works just as well as any authorial explanation.

The chapter on marriage and family life also covers the cultural influence of pamphlets, books, and magazines containing advice for women such as *Godey's Lady's Book* (1850); changing property and divorce laws; the increase of voluntary and circumstantial female singleness; marriage among enslaved persons; interracial marriages between African Americans and whites, and between Native Americans and whites; the careers of

marriage reformers such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Henry Blackwell; as well as Fanny Wright and the free love movement and other marriage alternatives, such as Mormon polygamy and Shaker celibacy. This excellent coverage takes only twenty pages of text so, needless to say, it is brief. Each of the other chapters is similar in breadth and brevity. The chapter on religion is a particularly helpful inclusion, tracing the important ways religion commingled with early feminism in women's mission organizations, societies, and reform work, as well as the growing demand for the pulpit.

Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America is an excellent overview of women's history for high-school students, complete and up-to-date with sophisticated, clear writing that does not condescend or oversimplify. It would also be helpful for college-level students of women's history, as both a reference and, with excellent scholarly reading lists, as a starting point for further research. As a work of synthesis, which is both brief and directed to a broad audience, it is not intended to be original or innovative. It is, however, a complete, up-to-date, clear, engaging, and well-executed overview in a slim volume. It is an excellent resource for libraries and classrooms.

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