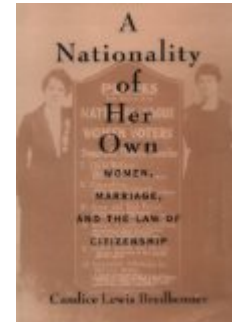


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Candice Lewis Bredbenner. *A Nationality of Her Own: Women, Marriage and the Law of Citizenship*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998. xi + 294 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20650-2.

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A Nationality of Her Own

So separated from each other—by residence, work, culture and experience—have been the lives of native-born and foreign-born women in the United States, that scholars are often hard-pressed to bring both groups simultaneously into clear focus. Typically, historians have focused on the settlement house movement, the Women's Trade Union League, the YWCA, the domestic science movement, and domestic service as arenas of contact between foreign-born and native-born women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Our understanding of the role of nativity in American women's lives has thus been shaped almost exclusively by the modes of inquiry of social history. Points of connection between this social history of the foreign-born women, and the intellectual and political histories of American feminism have been few indeed.

In *A Nationality of Her Own*, Candice Lewis Bredbenner identifies an apparently narrow topic—the law of citizenship as applied to married women—that brings together a surprising array of themes in women's history. The book sheds new light on the complex relationship between women of foreign and native birth. It contributes to a new feminist history of nationality and citizenship. Finally, it reveals how changing American attitudes toward migration influenced the rise, and subsequent splintering, of the American suffrage movement.

As a self-proclaimed “nation of immigrants,” the United States has laws of citizenship quite different from those of most European nations. It has allowed for the

relatively rapid naturalization of foreigners wishing to attain U.S. citizenship, it has granted “native-born” citizenship status to all children born on its territories to foreign parents, and it has extended citizenship to the children born abroad of U.S. citizens. By the early twentieth century, two long-term, and apparently unrelated changes provoked new levels of controversy about laws regulating citizenship. The first was the gradual acquisition of individual rights by female citizens; the second was the rise to its historical peak of immigration into the United States, and nativist opposition to its continuation. Even the timing of changes in migrant and female status is suggestive. The suffrage movement achieved its goal with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. In 1917, 1921, and 1924, nativists also succeeded in passing restrictive laws, and the numbers of immigrants began to fall rapidly soon thereafter.

Bredbenner studies a relatively minor topic in American legal history (the law of citizenship), but her book succeeds in linking changes in this law to two very important historical movements—feminism and nativism—that few think of as closely linked. Through extraordinarily careful research, she is able to show what frustrated feminists' efforts to achieve equality in citizenship. In the aftermath of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, their movement repeatedly suffered setbacks because nativists so feared a growing population of Americans with strong ties to other countries.

Congress first defined the citizenship of married

women in 1855 when they declared a citizen any foreign-born woman who married an American, or whose husband naturalized in order to become a citizen. From 1855 until 1922, foreign-born women, along with the dependent children of naturalizing fathers, achieved citizenship derivatively, without taking any positive action of their own. Neither native-born nor foreign-born women objected. As Bredbenner reminds us, the first generation of American feminists were only beginning to challenge the married woman's status as "femme couvert" in the 1850s, and the rights of citizenship for all women were, in any case, limited to the right to petition.

By the early years of the twentieth century, however, both law-makers' attitudes toward the naturalization of foreigners and American feminists' concepts of women's rights had altered significantly. Fuelled by exaggerated images of "disloyal heiresses" and concerned to limit access to citizenship by children born abroad of citizen parents, Congress in 1907 passed the Expatriation Act. Whereas the 1855 act had imposed derivative citizenship on foreign-born women, the 1907 act stripped native-born women of their nationality when they married a foreigner. While few women had responded negatively to the 1855 law, a vocal woman's right movement now objected to the change, which denied women a "nationality of her own." Demands for equal citizenship grew louder as women's citizenship rights—notably the right to vote—was attained.

Heeding both feminists' and nativists' complaints (about the large numbers of immigrants potentially eligible for American citizenship), Congress in 1922 passed the Cable Act. This act required foreign-born married women to acquire citizenship independently of their husbands, but it left in place the expatriation of married native-born women who left the country to live with their foreign-born spouses. Such women had to apply for re-entry to the country as aliens. As Bredbenner notes (p. 110), "inequities in the country's immigration and nationality laws lingered ... because the policies in which they were embedded ably served the restrictionist goals

of the era." Only in 1934 did President Roosevelt sign an equalization bill that gave native-born women the independent citizenship feminists demands.

Bredbenner traces in great detail the strategies American feminists to end marital expatriation in the 1920s and 1930s. Not surprisingly, egalitarian feminists (supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment, and generally associated with the National Women's Party) approached the issue somewhat differently from the activist opponents of the E.R.A., the "maternalist" feminists associated with the League of Women Voters. The National Women's Party sought an international treaty on equal citizenship to be signed by the United States, along with other nations. They were increasingly active in the international arena. Their opponents remained primarily concerned with the practical problems of American citizenship, and in building a citizenry of men and women united by a common Americanism. Just as opponents of the E.R.A. accused supporters of fostering an individualism that was destructive of women's family and community commitments, they accused internationalist feminists of failing to take seriously the divisiveness of independent citizenship. By focusing on this relatively obscure corner of American legal history, Bredbenner thus offers a new interpretation of post-suffrage feminist ideologies. Ultimately, the egalitarian feminists appear in her account as internationalists while the maternalist/"social housekeepers" are portrayed as nationalists concerned with building a patriotic citizenry.

If I have one reservation about Bredbenner's exhaustive research, it is that she is unable to make the opinions and strategies of foreign-born women central to her account. Poorly represented in the feminist organizations that took up the battle for independent citizenship in the 1920s, immigrant women's acquisition and exercise of American citizenship is a story that remains to be told.

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