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Carolyn L. Karcher. *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child.* Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1998. xxv + 803 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-2163-7; $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1485-1.

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Defying Domesticity

She was the steadfast friend of Garrison, Sumner, Parker, Phillips, Whittier, Lucretia Mott, and all who belonged to the circle of the foremost American reformers, and in some respects was the leader of the whole company.... Here was a most remarkable woman, one who lived a great life, but lived it so simply and with such limited consideration for herself that the more you study it the more it grows to be perhaps the truest life that an American woman has yet lived.

The New York Times, p. 606

Lydia Maria Child may have been "the truest life that an American woman has yet lived," but until recently she has been all but forgotten. Carolyn Karcher's eloquent account demonstrates why scholars should remember the woman who developed American children's serials and literature for the elderly, who fought for abolition, who pressed for Native American rights, and who encouraged the expansion of women's horizons. Upon finishing Karcher's book, it is difficult to understand why Child has been so long neglected. Karcher's explanation is that Child's ambiguity about feminist issues meant that she has not met feminist scholars' need for strong feminist role-models, and so, with few exceptions, Child's work has been overlooked and unpublished. After only a few pages of Karcher's analysis, however, it is clear that scholars do need to know more about Child, and by the end of *The First Woman in the Republic* it is difficult to understand how scholars have explained the events of the nineteenth century without her.

Unlike other biographies of Child–including Helene G. Baer's 1964 *The Heart is Like Heaven*, which inaccurately sentimentalized Child, and Milton Meltzer's 1965 *Tongue of Flame*, which simplified Child's activities because Meltzer's book was aimed at children–Karcher has focused on using Child to explore the tensions and contradictions that many nineteenth-century white middle- and upper-class American women confronted.[1] *The First Woman in the Republic* is organized chronologically, so that each chapter uncovers the impetus and consequences of Child's subsequent publication. Karcher has thoroughly researched Child's letters, publications, and reviews. Although historians will not always find Karcher's literary criticism of Child's writings useful, they will find Karcher's cultural biography of how Child exemplified and handled the paradoxes that a nineteenth-century women-in-public faced, intriguing and helpful.

As Karcher illustrates, Child remained childless, yet she managed to manipulate the cult of true womanhood to expand her publications into advice for mothers. Poverty forced Child and her husband to move repeatedly, and often to live with friends or in boarding houses, yet Child used the myth of women's domesticity to earn a living publishing domestic advice. Child vehemently rejected slavery but never came to agree with Mary Chesnut's pronouncement of women's analogous position. Child's husband not only failed to provide for her but also undermined her efforts to do so, yet Child devoted herself to salving his ego and earning their living in proper "feminine" ways. Finally, Child was a passionate public figure devoted to radical social change, yet she would not speak in public because she feared it would shame her husband. In Karcher's account, Child becomes a kind of nineteenth-century everywoman, negotiating the limitations that the cult of domesticity placed on women who could not afford to be only domestic.

The First Woman in the Republic is a dark portrait of the life cycle of a native-born, white, middle-class, nineteenth-century American woman. For a woman without children and a ne'er-do-well husband, life was a history of discrimination, poverty, struggle, depression, and contradiction. Child's childhood was in some ways typical of that of many early nineteenth-century girls. Because she loved to read, Child, who could not, of course, attend the same schools as her male siblings,

borrowed their books. Child's brother, Convers, was sent in 1811 to college. Like most girls whose families could afford to do so, Child attended the local dame school, and then the common school. The contrast between the educational opportunities for herself and those for her brother forced Child, Karcher argues, into intellectual self-reliance and sowed the seeds of her later feminist consciousness (p. 3).

The poor health of her mother also forced Child into self-reliance, and the story of Child's childhood reveals that for many nineteenth-century women, girlhood was not the pursuit of endless Victorian domesticity but the struggle for industry, thrift, and survival. Child was born to a mother who, at age 36, was already worn out with childbearing. Exhaustion and tuberculosis left Child's mother with little time or energy for her youngest daughter. By age ten, Child was nursing her bed-ridden mother. When Child was twelve, her mother died. Child was left alone with her desolate and difficult father, guilt over her mothers death, her favorite brother in college, her sister Mary married and moved away, and her sister Susannah soon to die. Unlike the picture presented in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *The Diary of Martha Ballard* of young girls carefully supervised and surrounded by their families, the images illustrated in Mary Ryan's, Suzanne Lebsock's, and Linda Kerber's books of mothers training young girls for charity work and republicanism, or the portrait etched in Joan Brumberg's *The Body Project* of nineteenth-century girls carefully mentored and emotionally supported by community-minded young women, Karcher paints a dismal depiction of nineteenth-century girlhood.[2]

The outlines of Child's story following her mother's death appear typical. She was sent to live with her sister Mary for domestic training, and a month after her nineteenth birthday began teaching. At the age of twenty-five, she married David L. Child, despite indications that he would be unlikely to provide for her. Although Lydia was already an author in her own right, having published her first book, an account of New England written in the male voice in 1825, she threw herself into her husband's career. Had her husband been successful, her account of New England might have been the only book she ever published. As it stood, his failures forced her take up her own pen again.

Lydia Child's marriage was far from ideal. Child's years were spent not in domesticity and gentility, but in a constant struggle to repay her husband's debts by taking in boarders, resuming teaching, and constantly moving to live with friends and in boarding houses when she and her husband could not afford a place of their own. For Child, like many nineteenth-century women, domesticity meant not the art, but the constant economy, of housewifery (p. 129). At the age of fifty-one, as America entered the era of industrial capitalism, Child was forced to return to the rural America of her childhood, to grow and can her own vegetables, fight mold and fermentation, and to carry pailfulls of water (p. 567).

Child's lifetime of productive writing, activity, nursing, and protecting others ended with her "having outlived her reputation" and dogged by "a procession of deaths" (p. 575). Her brother James, friends Henrietta Sargent, Louisa Loring, Samuel J. May, Lucy Osgood, Edmund Benzon (a former suitor), Charles Sumner, William Loyd Garrison, and her husband, David, all died. Child's life ended in poverty, with her bequeathing her few belongings, publishing pieces of her husband's (not her own) writings, seeking spiritual comfort through seances, fighting crippling depression, deafness, and rheumatism, and a final visit to Angelina Grimke, who had grown so senile she could no longer remember Child. In 1880, Child died of a heart attack, having acknowledged that an elderly nineteenth-century woman without children "formed no plans, and…never intend to form any" (p. 603). In the backlash that followed the failure of Reconstruction, she was quickly erased.

Despite the Hobbesian profile that Child's life outlines of the life-cycle of a nineteenth-century woman, Karcher reveals the triumphs of Child's ordeals, her evolution and awakening as a woman, and her significant role in shaping abolitionism and early feminism. Historians will find several chapters of *The First Woman in the Republic* particularly useful. Chapter Three, "The Juvenile Miscellany: The Creation of an American Children's Literature," and Chapter Seven, "Children's Literature and Antislavery: Conservative Medium, Radical Message," explore the creation and purpose of American children's serials. Child adopted the rhetoric of republicanism to justify the bi-monthly magazine, forming what historians might call "literary republicanism" by arguing that American children required "American scenes and American characters" in order, Karcher has argued like Paul Johnson, to inculcate children with bourgeoisie values (p. 68).[3] Women like Child used the opportunity of publishing children's literature to expand the public roles of Republican motherhood. Generally, Child's children's literature promoted middle-class and hegemonic values, but sometimes, Karcher reveals, Child challenged the nineteenth-century middle-class mantra that virtue would lead to success. Child occasionally subverted the success tales of men like Benjamin Franklin by writing

stories where poor students could not always compete with their wealthier classmates. In other stories, Child indicated "that most women were better off under the domestic economy of the past, in which they controlled many remunerative activities, than they were under industrial capitalism" (p. 78). Child also used children's literature to suggest that African-Americans and Native Americans should be assimilated into American society through intermarriage, and criticized the institution of slavery.

Just as Karcher's chapters on children's literature reveal that the advice presented to children may have more varied than historians have thought, so Chapter Six, "*The Frugal Housewife*: Financial Worries and Domestic Advice," indicates that nineteenth-century women found greater variety in advice literature than historians may have realized. Child undertook to write *The Frugal Housewife* out of financial desperation. Although writing advice manuals was a typical way for nineteenth-century women to earn income, Child's manual was not typical. Unlike other domestic advice books of the era such as Catherine Beecher's 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy* and William Alcott's 1837 *The Young Housekeeper*, Child focused her book not on domesticity, but on female republicanism. Child's manual encouraged "industry, frugality, plain living" (p. 129) and inveighed "against the universal error of encouraging girls to exaggerate the importance of getting married" (p. 130). Child emphasized frugality, not domesticity. For example, *The Frugal Housewife* "entailed making feather beds with feathers plucked from the fowls used for cooking, and when they grew old, ripping them apart, washing and drying the feathers, and sewing them up again–a process that also applied to mattresses" (p. 132).

Child's violation of generally prescribed behavior for ladies earned her the criticism of Sarah Hale and other reviewers because Child expanded the literature of advice offered to women beyond the prescriptions of true womanhood. Their criticism, and the demand for *The Frugal Housewife* which led to a second edition of the book only three months after the first edition in February, 1829, inspired Child to write both the *Little Girls Own Book*(1831) and *The Mother's Book*. Unlike Beecher, Alcott, and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Child did not glorify motherhood but only advised on how best to fulfill domestic responsibilities. Child instructed mothers to encourage their girls to read, and to read history, travels, and biography, rather than novels (p. 143), because "girls as well as boys…should be brought up with a dread of being dependent on the bounty of others and educated in a way that will enable them to support themselves respectably if they have to" (p. 144). The first edition of *The Mother's Book* sold out in six weeks, indicating not only that Child had tapped into a growing market, but also revealing that the advice and discourse about motherhood available was broader than reading only Alcott and Beacher would indicate. Child's subsequent publication of *The Family Nurse* likewise suggests that medicine in the mid-nineteenth century was not as male-dominated as scholars have concluded, since most medical care was still performed by women within the household. *The Family Nurse* again challenged the notion that all white middle-class women were "true women," since "relegated to women, nursing involved a multitude of unpleasant and burdensome tasks that indeed defied genteel language and belied the public image of the lady" (p. 150).

The First Woman in the Republic could be improved in some areas. Although Karcher defends the length of her analysis by stating that "until her [Child's] works are reprinted, the only way to expose readers to them is through quotation and exegesis," the book is sometimes repetitive and seemingly out-of-order (p. 611). For example, Karcher refers frequently to Child's cataclysmic meeting with William Loyd Garrison (particularly in Chapter Seven) before explaining when they met (in Chapter Eight). Of greater concern is that Karcher may overstate Child's "influence" on the generation of children for whom she wrote. Karcher credits Child with "broad influence as a children's writer" because "of the children who had poured over stories describing how little girls and boys like themselves were torn from their parents, kidnaped into slavery, and subjected to brutal tortures throughout their lives, a sizable cadre grew up to share the revulsion against slavery, the passionate identification with its victims, and the determination to fight for a multiracial egalitarian America that inspired the editor of their favorite magazine" (p. 170). Karcher does not appear to have the evidence to support this claim; she offers no estimates regarding the number of serial subscribers or readers, she does not explain in what regions of the country the magazine circulated, nor does she compare the circulation and readership of the *Juvenile Miscellany* with other serials. Her conclusions regarding Child's "influence" would be more persuasive if Karcher offered evidence of this nature to back her assertions and defined more clearly what she means by "influence." The historical analysis in *The First Woman in the Republic* is often one-sided. Readers should beware that Karcher has adopted Paul Johnson's arguments without discussion. For example, Karcher pronounces that "the *Juvenile Miscellany*…shared a commitment to inculcating

the middle-class value system" (p. 68) and "the future of the middle class hung on the successful transmission of its ideology; middle-class youth must continue to practice the virtues responsible for their forebears prosperity, and other classes must come to accept the bourgeois worldview" (p. 60). This may very well be so, but Karcher needs to address the historiographical debate she has entered.

These criticisms should, however, be read as only a few notes on an engrossing and pleasurable biography of an extraordinary woman. *The First Woman in the Republic* is a stimulating and enjoyable book, and Carolyn Karcher is to be thanked for uncovering and reminding scholars of Lydia Maria Child's significance.

Notes

[1]. Helene G. Baer, *The Heart is Like Heaven: The Life of Lydia Maria Child* (1964); Milton Meltzer, *Tongue of Flame: The Life of Lydia Maria Child* (1965).

[2]. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwifes Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (1990); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (1981); Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (1984); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980); Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1997).

[3]. Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (1978).

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