



Nancy C. Parrish. *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. xvii + 234 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2243-3.

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Annie Dillard, Lee Smith, and the Hollins Group: Southern Ladies with Minds of Their Own

For advocates of single-sex education, Nancy C. Parrish's book *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers* provides a useful counterpoint to the American Association of University Women's 1998 study *Separated by Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls*.^[1] While the authors of the AAUW report conclude that educators should focus their attention on creating more equal co-educational classrooms, Parrish suggests that all-female schools in general and Hollins College in particular provide supportive learning environments where young women are most likely to reach their artistic potential.^[2]

The "Hollins Group" refers to a circle of women writers who graduated in the class of 1967, including fiction writers Annie Dillard and Lee Smith and literary scholars Anne Goodwyn Jones and Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan. Intrigued by their critical and popular success, Parrish asks: What kind of environment encourages and facilitates women's writing? More specifically, she attempts to pinpoint the zeitgeist characterizing Hollins during the 1960s in order to explain "such a high level of achievement in a small private women's college within such a short span of years" (p. 8). Definitive answers to such questions are, of course, virtually impossible, but Parrish's inquiry leads in interesting directions.

First, Parrish provides an institutional history of Hollins College beginning with its 1852 genesis in the bucolic foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. A lack of material resources in antebellum and, particularly, postbellum southern culture, she maintains, meant that southern women's colleges were slower to

develop and fewer in number than women's colleges in the North. Furthermore, distinct ideological differences characterized women's education in the North and South. The Seven Sisters colleges, for example, generally developed in close proximity—both geographically and philosophically—to male institutions and emphasized the importance of professionalism.^[3] Because such a "cult of professionalism" challenged the South's "traditional notions of both class and gender," southern women's schools tended to isolate women geographically and emphasize the acquisition of the domestic and social skills deemed appropriate for upper-class young women (p. 12).

Above all, Parrish maintains, southern women's colleges reflected and reinforced the region's paternalistic ideology: schools served as protective "fathers," lovingly guiding the intellectual and social development of their "daughters." The schools' primary mission was to produce "charming wives and competent mothers" (p. 22). This paternalism, Parrish continues, lasted well into the twentieth century and earned Hollins a reputation as an elite "finishing school" rather than an intellectually rigorous institution of higher learning. Parrish suggests, however, that as Hollins became more nationally competitive after World War II, an increasingly diverse (at least in terms of class and region) and ambitious student body gradually began to erode the school's paternalistic character. During the 1960s, Hollins students "displaced the paternalistic model of community with a more sisterly one," and, as a result, Hollins functioned as a "womb of support" for a uniquely talented generation of female

writers (p. 34).

In the second part of her study, Parrish illustrates this ideological shift by exploring the relationships among the students and faculty in Hollins's writing program, with a particular emphasis on the role of Louis D. Rubin. A powerful and influential literary critic, fiction writer, and publisher, Rubin has been criticized in recent years for creating a self-serving definition of "southern" literature and constructing a canon centered around the works of his friends, mentors, and students. While Parrish acknowledges Rubin's propensity for paternalism, she finds his actions "more interactive than coercive" and "more altruistic than self-serving" (p. 74). Moreover, she asserts that "evidence suggests that the women of the Hollins Group had the talent and energy to engage in a dialectic of sorts" with their instructors and that, as a result, "Rubin's power was shaped and limited in subtle ways by the students" (p. 74).

Finally, Parrish explores the activities and writings of the Hollins Group itself. Though most of these women entered Hollins at the behest of their parents, each gave evidence of a "divided nature," according to Parrish (p. 87). On the one hand, the women acknowledged and, to varying extents, accepted the privileges and constraints inherent in the role of the traditional "southern lady." Yet, on the other hand, each demonstrated a resistance to this prescribed role, and most pushed the limits of acceptable social behavior in one way or another. Together the Hollins Group "forged a rebellious group identity" which enabled each individual to develop her creative and intellectual potential while secure in the knowledge that she had the group's support. "A balance between individual literary aspiration and collaborative feminist spirit," Parrish continues, is evident in the early writings of Dillard, Smith, and Jones, among others, and continues to drive their work today (p. 118). The powerful bonds formed among these women at Hollins, Parrish concludes, played (and continue to play) a pivotal role in each writer's extraordinary professional success.

As with any study of this nature, striking a balance between group identity and individual personalities proves difficult. In Parrish's work, group similarities sometimes obscure individual differences, and, as the title indicates, Smith and Dillard grab most of the limelight. In addition, Parrish's overview of women's education in the North and South is likely to prove controversial in light of Christie Anne Farnham's 1994 study *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South*. While Parrish

finds southerners more reluctant than northerners to enroll their daughters in women's colleges, Farnham maintains that the "South evidenced the greatest interest in female colleges of any region in the nation," due in part to its rigid class hierarchy.^[4] Indeed, given the similarities in subject matter and differences in opinion, it seems odd that Parrish never mentions Farnham's work.

Parrish's intentionally limited scope leads to another curious omission: a lack of historical context. Given Hollins's self-identification with the values of the Old South, it is particularly disturbing to find little mention of the Civil Rights Movement in the book. The college's official policy on integration is unclear and, with the exception of Anne Goodwyn Jones, members of the Hollins Group seem to have been relatively oblivious to the tremendous social unrest in the region. Surely, this cannot have been the case. Similarly, one wonders if the writers were aware of anti-war protests, the free speech movement, and/or the attempts to abolish the "in loco parentis" policy on college campuses across the nation.

As these comments suggest, the links between Hollins's institutional history and the activities of the Hollins Group need further development. Parrish credits the Hollins Group with challenging and shaping both the writing program and the college itself. While this may well have been true, the evidence presented fails to convincingly illustrate the point. This difficulty stems, I think, from a more general problem in the book: an undertheorized concept of power. Throughout her study, Parrish repeatedly calls the dominant ideology at Hollins "benign paternalism." Is paternalism ever completely benign? How exactly does the "sisterhood" of the Hollins Group challenge the powerful "father" figure intrinsic in paternalism? Similarly, Parrish maintains that because Louis Rubin encouraged, rather than indoctrinated, his students, his was a "paternalism by negotiation" (p. 76). Yet don't all but the most primitive power structures involve some level of negotiation between the dominant and the subordinate? More generally, the book has an unmistakably celebratory tone; Parrish clearly admires the Hollins Group and sees the Hollins writing community as an ideal to be emulated. As a result, she sometimes overstates the challenge these remarkably talented women presented to the Hollins administration and downplays the important power relationships inherent in any institution of higher learning.

Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers, however, helps us understand Parrish's fascination with, and respect for, a significant

group of women. The study fills an important gap in southern literary history and sheds much light on the value of single-sex education and the development of writing communities.

Notes

[1]. *Separated By Sex: A Critical Look at Single-Sex Education for Girls* (Washington, D.C.: AAUW Educational Foundation, 1998), p. 2.

[2]. Hollins College became Hollins University in 1998, the same year Parrish's study was published.

[3]. The Seven Sisters included Mt. Holyoke, Smith, Vassar, Barnard, Radcliffe, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr.

[4]. Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York and London: New York University Press), 1994.

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