H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deirdre Beddoe. *Discovering Women's History: A Practical Guide to Researching the Lives of Women Since 1800.* London and New York: Longman, 1998. x + 200 pp. $26.25 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-31148-0.

Reviewed by Mary M. Flekke (Instructional Services Librarian, Roux Library, Florida Southern College, Lakeland)
Published on H-Oralhist (July, 1999)

Research Shocks!

Researchers will enjoy this third edition of Deirdre Beddoe's *Discovering Women's History* for the questions it leaves unanswered and the multitude of research topics still to be explored. I found this book enjoyable, highly readable, and frightening. By frightening, I mean the discoveries of how poorly women were regarded in the areas of education in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this work, Beddoe provides some textual and descriptive material of the times, making this both an informational work and a teaching work. American readers will find some of the linguistic combinations interesting as British English differs slightly from the American form. The source materials used for her research are all materials from England as her topic is British women. In this third edition, Beddoe divides her work into eight chapters and an introduction. Two of the chapters discuss research and the presentation of the findings, while the other six chapters discuss actual aspects of women's history from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century.

In her introduction, Beddoe discusses the background of her previous two editions and changes made to this edition. Titled "...Why Should We Study Women's History," Beddoe's introduction explains why the subject is important. She writes, "We need to know our past to understand our present. The present is a product of the past: we are moulded and conditioned by a past of which we are alarmingly ignorant. We need to look backwards to seek the origin and development of many of the wrongs and inequalities which women suffer today.... By looking to an earlier stage of industrial society we can throw some light on why women's work has been evaluated as worth less than men's" (pp. 1-2). Exploring the past, according to Beddoe, sheds light on the present, and the nineteenth century was a time when the fortunes of women "yo-yoed" from high points to low points depending on what world events were doing. Wars, as they do in every part of the social stratum, proved beneficial to the general welfare of women. Women gained more responsibilities, more leeway in society, and more freedom to express themselves and their native intelligence.

Studying women's history is not always easy. Older texts very often pay lipservice to the stereotypes of women as housewife, although in many cases women of previous centuries had very different opportunities. Beddoe writes, "the domestic ideology was created in the early nineteenth century when middle-class women were pushed into the private sphere of the home and men went out into the public world" (p. 3). Sources she identifies later prove that this was not true for all women. These sources, however, are not always obvious or conventional. Beddoe cites several sources that the typical researcher may not think of using when looking for information on women. Some of these include novels, hymn books, criminal records, old wives tales, folk remedies, rituals and women's magazines. Other traditional sources are also discussed, such as parish registers, census returns and Parliamentary Papers.

Recent years have seen debates within the Women's Studies field. More frequently, the term "Gender Studies" is used as some 'non-feminists' seek to give equal weight to the study of masculinity and femininity. Beddoe says she prefers "a woman-centered history and this book has been written from that viewpoint" (p. 7). She likens the task of studying women's history to a "rescue mission" where the past must be unearthed and a permanent record made of the findings. Secondly, more books must be written to make people aware of this history, and thirdly we must continue to push for the recognition of women's history at all levels of the educational system (p. 7). Beddoe organized the book around topics she regards as essential to the reconstruction of women's past lives. The topics she chose were the images of woman; education; waged work; family life and home life, illegitimacy, birth control and sexuality; and political activity. The first chapter discusses doing a research project and

writing a dissertation and the last chapter deals with how the researcher makes the findings available to a wider audience.

"Doing a research project: writing a dissertation" is the title of the first chapter. Here, Beddoe outlines the process of writing a research paper or dissertation from the selection of the topic, to the methods of researching and writing to actual paper. A wise comment she makes, which I see in daily life around the library, is to choose a topic that has researchable sources. She also suggests doing preliminary research to familiarize yourself with the topic. Suggestions include topics in which you are interested and enthusiastic about, and a manageable project–not too broad, but not too narrow either (p. 12).

Once you have chosen your topic, you should become aware of the different resources available to facilitate your research. These include numerous historical sources, both primary and secondary. After describing and defining primary and secondary sources, Beddoe goes on to describe find them–her favorite places for sources being libraries and records offices. (Since she is a British author, an American reader must make some translations to the proper 'office' match in the United States.) Once you have identified the library you want to use, Beddoe recommends that you become familiar with its catalogs and indexes. She also recommends bibliographies as good places to look for source material. Other sources she recommends include computerized literature searches, newspapers, inter-library loan, record offices, and oral interviews.

As research is begun, Beddoe recommends starting with secondary sources, noting that bibliographies attached to secondary sources often contain references to primary sources which should also be checked as soon as possible. Beddoe's whole book can be used as a guide to sources of women's history, and each chapter has lists of resources attached, both primary and secondary. As you begin your research, take notes. This useful for organization when you begin to write up your findings. (I found this portion of the chapter a little discomforting as she described paper and types of notebooks that American readers may not recognize, as they are specific to England.) In addition to organization, you should plan and define your objectives. Once you have your research, notes, and plan of attack, you can begin writing. This may take several drafts before it is completed to your satisfaction. She also discusses footnotes, the citing of sources, and the format of the dissertation.

Chapter Two, "The Changing Image," discusses stereotyped images of women from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. In her discussion on the images of women, Beddoe covers the spectrum from the perfect upper class Victorian lady to women of the lower classes. Marriage was the goal of women in this era, and training went almost exclusively towards that end. Young girls were taught to be submissive to their husbands by first being submissive to their brothers. In the upper classes, women maintained separate spheres so that the concept of being inferior to males was not quite so obvious (p. 24). Women's proper place was in the home (the attitudes toward women who worked is discussed in a later chapter). The upper class women were frequently pictured as being idle, despite being a mother several times over; they had servants to care for children and housekeeping. Lower class women did not have the opportunity to be idle. Children, housekeeping and husband took up the better part of a woman's day. The chapter on family life gives an excellent description of the poor woman's daily life (p. 138-39).

Medical views were also an interesting study in contrasts. Middle and upper class women were regarded as inherently sick if they tried to step beyond their prescribed roles, but working class women who ran high medical risks were expected to be strong and enduring (pp. 28-29). In the nineteenth century, a middle class began to become more prevalent. Literature reflects this with more heroines cast in male roles, reflecting the introduction of more women into the workforce in traditionally male jobs. The wars were responsible for this change, as the women were needed to replace men in industry. This, however, was short lived. As Beddoe writes, "The speed with which women had appeared in industry during the war was surpassed by the speed with which they vanished from it … their jobs restored to men."

This chapter is an example of the study of the image of women. At the end of the chapter, Beddoe describes how it might have been researched. She lists sources and how to assess them. She offers sample questions that another researcher might take to branch off from this particular angle to another whole project. She carries this trait through each chapter. This book presents a myriad of possible research topics.

Chapter Three, "The Education Of Girls," was a truly frightening chapter. Before 1880, education in England was not compulsory. There was little formal education, and it was almost non-existent for girls. Many schools were run by charities or religious orders, although workhouses and factories sometimes had rudimentary school facilities. Compulsory education made life difficult at home, many of the lower classes being dependent on

wages brought in by the entire family. Pulling children from the workforce reduced the family income. In the early days, topics included cookery and laundry. Domestic education was the primary curriculum for lower-and middle-class girls. Upper classes got a better and broader education, music was considered appropriate for girls, and some families were generous enough to allow daughters to sit in on the son's lessons. I was amazed in reading some of the curriculum that Beddoe cited in this chapter. Remembering back to the days of my own secondary schooling when home economics was still a significant course for girls, I can remember taking some of the instructions home and having my mother correct them, as that was not the way we did things at my house. I can imagine this happening to these girls, too! That could prove very distracting!

Beddoe makes use of some new sources in this chapter. She quotes from autobiographies, journals, and local school records. In the school records, she has found syllabi to illustrate the course of study that took place in most English towns during the late 1800s. The Housewifery syllabus on page 71 and 72 was incredible from the late twentieth century viewpoint. Lessons included the importance of cleanliness, combustion, kitchenwork, bedrooms, dusting, and sweeping the carpet (p. 71). It stretches the imagination to visualize spending time on such fussy details in a class. One thing not specified in the Housewifery syllabus was the length of time taken to teach this curriculum. On the next two pages the Laundry Work syllabus is given. Here it states that it is the syllabus for the first year's course and the syllabus for the second year's course (p. 73). If I had had to sit through this, I would have been bored, and I can quite imagine many girls probably were. Beddoe used some of her oral history interviews in this chapter, from which one derives a sense of dissatisfaction with the education. Not necessarily with the curriculum, though some of that comes through, but as is the case throughout humanity, teachers made value judgments on what the girls were capable of even with such a limited curriculum as they had. One girl was prohibited from making her mother an apron because her hands were too dirty.

Chapter Four, "Women's Waged Work," surveys the working life of women from the Industrial Revolution to just before World War II. Beddoe identifies two methods of approach to women in the labor force that she has found effective. First, she addresses "the idea and practice of the sexual division of labour." First, she says, we "should check if the same work was done by men. If not, why not?" She then concludes that the "sexual division of labour therefore split the working class along the lines of sex." Her second approach is to "note the way in which women were regarded as a cheap reserve pool of labour which could be brought in and out of the workforce to suit the requirements of capital and/or state" (p. 90).

As Beddoe points out, women have always been working–the family farm, housework, etc., kept women busy and provided them with a great variety of skills. Agriculture was always a great employer of women and still is if you look at migrant labor in the twentieth century. The Industrial Revolution, however, brought about a change in focus in women's labor. Now they had the opportunity to go outside the family establishment and earn "real" money. This, however, had mixed rewards. Those women who stayed home looked down on women who worked outside the home. This still happens today; the, however, the stigma attached certainly was different. During the Industrial Revolution, a single female working outside the family nest was considered an immoral flirt. Working while single hurt a woman's chances of getting married, as it was assumed if she was working she would make a potentially irresponsible wife and mother. Married women who worked outside the home too might not make responsible mothers. The Trades Union Congress declared in 1877, "that men's wives should be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition of livelihood with the great strong men of the world" (p. 95).

The First World War, on the other hand, saw women hired into traditionally men's jobs by the hundreds, which in turn lead to women joining trade unions. Some unions welcomed their female members, though many felt threatened by women and some kept women in a separate organization within the organization (p. 96). When the war ended, most of the jobs that women had taken over were given back to the men, creating massive unemployment statistics among women. Women who were content to return to the home did not file for unemployment, so the statistics available may be low, and overall, the inter-war years, while retrogressive in some respects, did show progress in some areas where women were able to retain the jobs they had gotten during the war. The interesting result of the lay-off of women after World War I was that when the men were called up for World War II, the women's response to job openings was poor. This may have been caused not only from having lost their jobs to men, but these women may also learned that some of the factory work could be dangerous; in addition, many women had been persuaded that their place was in the home throughout the almost twenty years between wars. By early 1941, the British government actually had to mobilize women to fight labour and pro-

duction shortages. Some of the new sources that Beddoe used to supplement this chapter included records of government or local authority training centers, employment and trade union records, criminal records, commercial directories, and records of private business and labour history societies.

Chapter Five discussed "Women And Family Life." Beddoe sets this chapter up with a different structure from the previous ones. This chapter is not a study, but a practical guide to finding out about women's lives within the family. She listed her questions under the heading "Oral History" on pages 145-46. She then includes a annotated list of secondary sources on the nineteenth century, on the twentieth century, and on women writing and speaking about their own lives. The next section lists some examples of primary sources, consisting of surveys, household manuals/advice books, women's magazines, documentary and record sources, oral history, photographs, and museums.

Chapter Six, "Aspects Of Sexuality," I found somewhat disappointing after being accustomed to the more descriptive, researched technique Beddoe had utilized in the earlier chapters. This disappointment, as she acknowledges, may occur because these areas are "all to a certain extent open to investigation" (p. 150). In this chapter, she gives short narrative descriptions of illegitimacy, birth control, and lesbian existence, with a lengthier narrative dedicated to birth control. In listing the sources used for this research, she separates them into the above mentioned categories of sexuality and then into secondary and primary breakdowns.

For Chapter Seven, "Women And Politics," Beddoe again returns to her researched, narrative description of the topic. Here she concentrates mostly on the "local dimension of women's history ... not primarily with the remarkable women who made the great break-throughs in national politics by being elected as Mps and appointed as ministers" (p. 174). In this chapter, she discusses how women's involvement in politics has changed over the centuries as before the possibility of voting and actually serving in office. Women could still make their voices and opinions heard by their actions and activities, and she points out occasions where men listened to the voices of women in constructing their legislation. As with her previous chapters, Beddoe divides her sources into the secondary and primary categories. In this chapter, however, she lists some specific topics in the source listings. These include Chartism, anti-slavery movements, campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts, the late nineteenth century and the suffrage movement, the twentieth century, and biographies and autobiographies.

Chapter Eight, "Sharing Your Findings," ties the dissertation together. Here Beddoe shares some ideas of what to do with the material you have gathered, and here she lists some other ideas beyond simply writing a dissertation. These suggestions include the use of local radio–not only in presenting a program, but also to solicit materials–video, local history society journals, lectures, and other ideas such as calendars, history walks, and exhibitions. She ends the chapter suggesting that depositing research findings in a local library or historical society enhances their value to future researchers. Finally, Beddoe closes her book with an appendix of some useful addresses and an index. As we are so very deeply into the Internet age now, websites would have enhanced this section.

I found Beddoe's book easy to read, and I comprehend the points she was making in her lessons on how to research the topics presented. The audience for this book would be twofold. It could be used by college students doing research on women's issues, as there is enough textual material to provide background for actual research work as well as providing other sources for further study. It is also an excellent tool for getting ideas for other projects and for finding out how to go from "A to Z" in preparing a research paper or dissertation.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Mary M. Flekke. Review of Beddoe, Deirdre, *Discovering Women's History: A Practical Guide to Researching the Lives of Women Since 1800.* H-Oralhist, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3253

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.