

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.

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Published on H-Women (August, 1999)



Valuable Guide for U.K. Students

Deirdre Beddoe, Professor Emerita of Women's History at the University of Glamorgan, has updated her guide to researching the lives of British women who lived during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First published by Pandora in 1983, *Discovering Women's History* would prove most useful to novice historians attending secondary schools or colleges in the United Kingdom. Although its general guidelines might be of interest to students in other countries, much of the text focuses rather specifically on the history of British women and on the organization and availability of archival material in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.

A concise and compelling "Introduction: why should we study women's history?" provides multiple answers: to appreciate the value of individual and local social contributions; to enhance our understanding of our past; to comprehend the underlying political motivations of educational policies, employment practices, and prescriptive literature as they applied to women; to challenge received "truths;" to compile stories of women's courage and accomplishments that will serve as a source of shared strength; and to understand the ways in which women's lives have changed over the centuries. Furthermore, Beddoe argues, local histories are essential to further our understanding of local variations in and contributions to employment, suffrage and other social movements, educational practices, etc. She particularly encourages students to engage in collecting oral histories in order to preserve the stories of older women.

In her new first chapter, Beddoe does an exemplary job of explaining the basics of formulating a research question with appropriate parameters and of gathering one's information in an orderly manner. Having known a fair number of graduate students who took on impossibly vast or vague dissertation topics and others who wrote massive dissertations and then had to spend a year or two tying up loose bibliographic ends due to sloppy record-keeping, I feel that careful planning and organization is a gospel that should be preached early and often.

Subsequent chapters address various issues related to the history of women in Great Britain. Chapter Two introduces the stereotyped ideals purveyed by the media. Always unattainable by the vast majority, these ideals were not even consistent: they changed periodically to suit the needs of government, military, and economy. An excellent chapter on girls' education follows. Beddoe examines both the realities of education for middle- and working-class and the policy motivations undergirding the institution. Chapter four examines women's waged work. Chapter five treats the often scandalously hard work and deprivation that comprised home life for the majority of women during the past two centuries. In chapter six, Beddoe briefly treats several aspects of women's sexuality: illegitimate births, birth control, and lesbianism. She tackles the role of women in politics in chapter seven. The final chapter suggests various approaches to sharing one's discoveries. In addition to the expected publications and lectures, she mentions produc-

ing a radio program or video, leading walking tours of historic districts, curating an exhibition, or designing a pamphlet or calendar. A final appendix provides names, addresses, and telephone numbers of libraries, archives, and organizations that might provide useful information to the women's historian.

One might imagine that these summary histories would be insufferably dry. Such is very far from the case. The text is leavened with tantalizing excerpts from a wide range of primary sources chosen to give students a taste of the original documents they might encounter in their own research. Many of these documents provide powerful details of gender inequities, ranging from inferior educational and employment opportunities to different nutritional allotments. A 1913 survey of working-class women's lives tells us that a nursing mother, "Mrs. X," subsisted primarily on bread and margarine or drippings, as did her older children, while Mr. X enjoyed kippers, sausages, or a bit of beef at nearly every meal. One cannot imagine anyone reading such material without becoming an ardent feminist.

My primary concern about this otherwise excellent guide is that it omits the electronic resources available through college, university, and larger local libraries, and via the Internet. For example, students in British universities generally have access to the CD-ROM source *Core Resources for Historians*. This government-sponsored project has been produced by the Courseware Consortium to provide core text, including transcriptions of print documents and reproductions of images, detailing urbanization in Britain from ca. 1780 through 1920. Although the Internet is not yet the ultimate source for historical research, it has a great deal to offer. Examples of useful resources for the very students Beddoe addresses include the Brown University Women Writers Project, which provides full text of pre-Victorian women's writ-

ing in many formats. An increasing number of repositories, including Duke's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, have active Web sites, which include detailed information about archival holdings as well as a number of scanned and transcribed primary documents. Through the World Wide Web, one may access current information about staff, hours, and holdings of many local, regional, and national archives. Such sites often allow one to query staff via e-mail about any pertinent documents available, special holiday hours, directions to the repository, and other useful information. One may verify bibliographic references through shared cataloging systems such as WorldCat (OCLC), which enables one to locate, and often borrow or obtain in photocopy, many rare and out-of-print sources that are not available locally. Through the Internet, students might find addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses of persons whom they might wish to interview or businesses and other organizations with an in-house archive. Electronic sources are no substitute for mucking about with original records, but they can go a long way towards increasing the researcher's efficiency.

A professor who uses *Discovering Women's History* as a text for a methods course and recommends it to her students would do well to supplement it with a detailed discussion of the electronic sources available in her institution and community, or to ask a librarian to do so. Despite this weakness, Professor Beddoe's guide is beautifully written, rich with carefully considered and valuable information, and truly inspirational. It is highly recommended.

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Citation: Elizabeth Dunn. Review of Beddoe, Deirdre, *Discovering Women's History: A Practical Guide to Researching the Lives of Women Since 1800*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

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