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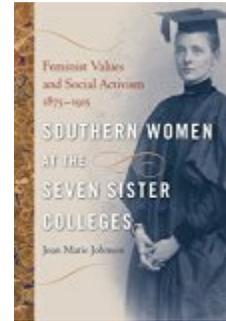
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joan Marie Johnson. *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges: Feminist Values and Social Activism, 1875-1915*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. Illustrations. 229 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3468-4.

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Southern White Women at Northern Women's Colleges during the Progressive Era

White southern women's journey from "pedestal to politics" in the Progressive Era has long fascinated historians. Decades after the Civil War, the dependent and apolitical "southern lady" remained a popular ideal used to justify the legitimacy of white southern civilization. The emergence of women's social activism in the post-Reconstruction South posed a great challenge to this ideal and forever changed the southern landscape.[1] Joan Marie Johnson's *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges* offers insight into the emergence of educated white women who served as leaders of southern women's clubs, reform movements, and suffrage campaigns.

Johnson offers a collective biography of the approximately one thousand southern white women who chose to travel north to attend one of the Seven Sister colleges (Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Barnard). The Seven Sisters were known for cultivating women's independence and activism. And indeed, those southern women who attended the Seven Sisters came to comprise a disproportionately high percentage of the female leadership of southern clubs, suffrage efforts, and Progressive organizations. Johnson uses letters and alumnae directories to trace these students' journeys, from the restraints and complications their gender and region placed on their initial college selection and preparation, to how southern white women put their education to use when they returned home. Johnson's account of these pioneering

women contributes not only to our understanding of the formation of southern women's activism and the history of women's higher education, but also to the interplay of gender and regional identity.

Those southern women who felt compelled to leave their native region for the Seven Sisters were drawn by the opportunity to broaden and better themselves through a rigorous liberal arts education. In the first chapter, "In the Wonderland of the Mind": The Benefits of a Liberal Arts Education," Johnson demonstrates that such a curriculum was generally unavailable in the South. Although the Seven Sisters colleges were also dedicated to cultivating womanhood in their students, southern educators' myopic emphasis on developing purity, piousness, and charm in budding "southern ladies" did not offer female students the space to challenge themselves fully. Seven Sisters alumnae opened young southern women's eyes to the opportunities available at northern schools and helped prospective students prepare for higher education. As Johnson explains in her second chapter, the networks and college clubs created by alumnae spread information about particular colleges. The southern prep schools that alumnae founded and staffed gave young women the education and connections that facilitated acceptance into the Seven Sisters colleges. In this chapter, Johnson also examines the characteristics that drew students to each college, such as Bryn Mawr's reputation for high academic standards, Wellesley's all-female faculty, and Vassar's refusal to admit black stu-

dents.

The heart of Johnson's argument lies in chapters 3 and 4. Despite their willingness to break from their culture, southern students faced a harrowing sense of displacement and inadequacy when they first arrived at Seven Sisters colleges. In "From Homesick Southerners to Independent Yankees: The Campus Experience," Johnson mines a rich and colorful archive of personal letters to show how southern students explicitly connected their sense of displacement with their southern culture and identity. What Jane Addams termed "the family claim" of domestic life weighed heavily on southern women, who were raised to maintain unwavering dedication to their kin. The southern lady ideal's core tenet—dependency—made life at the Seven Sisters a challenge, especially at first. Although the women Johnson examines were over-achievers rather than the stereotypical belles northern classmates and instructors sometimes perceived them to be, Johnson asserts that they still viewed independence as a "Yankee characteristic" rather than a natural stage in their development (p. 62). Southern women worked hard to fulfill their academic requirements, and in so doing, the young women gained their own sense of independence.

Despite attaining this "Yankee" trait, the women Johnson examines continued to feel distinctly southern while at the Seven Sisters. Although for a few students the college experience served as a call to challenge southern racial mores, most students reaffirmed their southern identities while at the Seven Sisters. Students created formal and informal networks to uphold and celebrate their southern identity. Perhaps the most fascinating of these networks were Southern Clubs. The Lost Cause rituals, rhetoric, and agenda of Southern Clubs bore a striking similarity to those of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Despite these activities, upon their return to the South, Seven Sisters alumnae again felt out of place. They married at lower rates than young women who did not leave the South, and even those who did marry were no longer content with domestic life alone. The numerous clubs and associations at the Seven Sisters gave

southern women experience in leadership and organizing, and alumnae were eager to put these skills to use in women's organizations and volunteer work. Johnson's final chapter, "After College: The Activist," examines the southern legacy of a Seven Sisters education, showing that this group of women not only joined social activist efforts, but also often formed and led them. Although some scholars may disagree with Johnson's emphasis on northern influence in fostering the development of southern women's activism, her evidence is compelling. Johnson ably demonstrates that northern-educated southern women could be found at the forefront of club, benevolent, and suffrage organizations across the region. Furthermore, Johnson's account of the distinct sense of southernness that students maintained during college suggests that the independence and leadership alumnae displayed was not a wholesale Yankee import, but rather a northern-influenced reconfiguration of southern white womanhood. While previous historians have also argued that this generation of educated southern white women activists redefined the southern lady as a more activist figure, *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges* reveals the difference a rigorous college education made for future female leaders.

Questions remain, perhaps, about the legacy of this new southern womanhood. Although the women Johnson examines certainly identified themselves as southern and as "proper ladies," how exactly did the southern lady ideal endure after its keystone quality—dependence on southern men—was removed for a group of prominent southern women? While not definitively answering this question, Johnson's work will be a useful resource for those interested in the content and development of southern identities. Historians of education and women's activism will also find *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges* an engaging and worthwhile read.

Note

[1]. The classic work on the southern lady ideal remains Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

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