

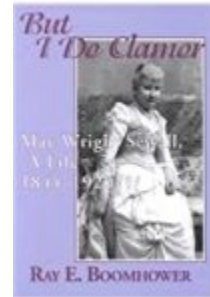
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ray E. Boomhower. *But I Do Clamor: May Wright Sewall, A Life, 1844-1920*. Zionsville: Guild Press of Indiana, 2001. xii + 199 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57860-087-8.

Reviewed by Anita Ashendel (Department of Humanities, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi)

Published on H-Indiana (October, 2001)



Women and Politics in Indiana's Golden Age

Women and Politics in Indiana's Golden Age

In this latest addition to the Guild Press series on notable Indiana women, author Ray Boomhower places May Wright Sewall on the national stage of the passage of women's suffrage, the peace movement, and the spiritualist movement. This look at Sewall joins Boomhower's earlier study about Juliet Strauss, Robert Barrow's recent analysis of Albion Fellows Bacon, and Robert Kriebel's work on Helen Gougar as historians place Hoosier women in the historical record. More importantly, this biography reveals the inner workings of reform associations and the social world of activists in general both within Indianapolis and the nation at the end of the nineteenth century. By moving Sewall's activities outside of Indiana and linking them to the nation, Boomhower's work strengthens more traditional studies of Hoosier activism by demonstrating the breadth, depth, and national reach of such organizations.

Sewall was born Mary Eliza Wright in Wisconsin in 1844. She later changed her name to May, an early indication of her forceful and determined nature that friends and foes spoke of in later years. She excelled in school and became a teacher in 1863. She married Edwin Thompson and taught school in Franklin, Indiana, before moving to Indianapolis where they continued to teach and also promoted the growing cultural and political organizations in the state capital. After Thompson's early death, she married Theodore Sewall of Indianapolis.

Boomhower's chapter on Sewall's suffrage activities

is a concise and clear study of Hoosier women's difficulties with the state legislature and the political chicanery that stalled the suffrage movement for so long. It is also readily apparent that in the years before the laws of the state or nation recognized women as political actors, women had a clear understanding of formal politics. Sewall campaigned at the state level, became well acquainted with national leaders such as Susan B. Anthony, and then moved into an organizational role with the National Woman Suffrage Association. She worked closely with Anthony in a turbulent session which merged the American Woman Suffrage Association with the National to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Sewall's often domineering personality led to friction with other women's leaders within and outside Indiana. This look into the inner machinations of state and national suffrage groups clearly demonstrates the tensions that developed when women from diverse backgrounds and with other goals to champion attempted to work together to push through suffrage.

Sewall's activities in all types of associations—suffrage, social clubs, art associations, education—led her to channel her abundant mental and physical energy to the formation of the National Council of Women and the International Council of Women. The formation of the groups, like the rest of Sewall's undertakings, was not without controversy. Some suffrage organizers protested the joining together of women both for and against expanded political rights for women. Sewall responded that these organizations would “rouse women to new

thought, will intensify their love of liberty and will give them a realizing sense of the power of combination” (p. 88).

This intense interest in uniting persons from all areas of life also led to Sewall’s acceptance of an offer from Henry Ford to join his peace mission to Europe in 1915. Ford believed that the European war was a tragic error and must be stopped. He gathered prominent Americans to join him on a trip through hostile waters and a frigid Scandinavian winter to promote the cause of peace. Although Ford contracted a cold and could not complete the journey, Sewall and the others continued the hopeless mission.

One of the most intriguing parts of Sewall’s life was her experience with spiritualism. Theodore Sewall told his wife he would attempt to contact her after death. She claimed to have forgotten about this remark until a chance encounter with a spiritualist at a camp in Lily Dale, New York, provided her with an opportunity to communicate with him through the use of blank slate writing. After that, Sewall claimed to have communicated frequently with her dead husband. A few months before her death in 1920, Sewall’s adventures in spiritualism were published as a book, *Neither Dead nor Sleeping*. Sewall’s friend, Hoosier author Booth Tarkington, persuaded Indianapolis based Bobbs Merrill to publish her account of contact not only with her dead husband, but also with Anton Rubinstein and a medieval priest who she claimed cured her of a disease. Boomhower points out the long standing connection between women’s rights activists and the spiritualist movement to explain this seemingly irrational act from a woman known for her ceaseless work in present realities and problems.

Ray Boomhower has tackled a difficult subject with this book. Sewall participated in almost every possible association at the end of the nineteenth century, led an impressive women’s school at a time when women’s education was increasingly studied and questioned, and dabbled in a movement that could have discredited her achievements. She lived in a city that experienced intense social and cultural change and in a state with a national political and social reach that it would arguably never again achieve. His descriptions of Hoosier and national organizations is concise and he demonstrates the

intense and important links between the state and the nation—a feat that few other historians of Hoosier women have accomplished. Along the way Boomhower peppers his work with little known stories such as Sewall’s study of the wide variation in pay between male and female teachers in Indianapolis. He also sheds light on the social lives of prominent Indianapolis residents in a sometimes unflattering but always revealing way.

Boomhower’s work is frustrating in two ways. His reliance on secondary works is understandable, as part of his purpose is to tie the state to the nation. The reader, however, does not get to hear from May Sewall. We view her through the eyes of others and, except in a few areas, not through her own words. While her actions indeed speak volumes, it is difficult to discern her motives for her actions beyond her widely recognized stubbornness in the face of any sort of obstacle or criticism. The reader knows what she did, but the causes remain open to speculation. Perhaps the sources are not available for such an intimate view. If this is the case, a comment in the bibliography would set the reader at ease. Second, Boomhower hides his important material in vague chapter titles and even the title of his book. By looking at these alone, the reader misses the many layers of Sewall’s life and Boomhower’s talents for making difficult connections between Sewall’s activities. Obviously this book is about much more than May Wright Sewall. It is a very important study of local, state, and national reform associations.

Far and away Boomhower’s major contribution is to show the cooperation and friction between women’s groups as they dealt with a myriad of complementary and conflicting political issues such as suffrage, prohibition, social justice issues, women’s education, and even the effects of World War I. The conflicts themselves are not amazing. What is amazing is that in spite of these conflicts much was achieved. Women like Sewall provided ties to national groups that Hoosier activists needed to continue the work in a state whose traditional conservatism did not promote change. Historians and general readers who would like a glimpse at the intellectual and political circles of a midwestern city at the turn of the century and at the local, state, and national workings of the women’s rights movement will benefit from a close reading of this book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-indiana>

Citation: Anita Ashendel. Review of Boomhower, Ray E., *But I Do Clamor: May Wright Sewall, A Life, 1844-1920*. H-Indiana, H-Net Reviews. October, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5553>

Copyright © 2001 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.