H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joan Marie Johnson, ed. *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 258 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-443-5.

Reviewed by Monica Tetzlaff (Department of History, Indiana University, South Bend)
Published on H-SAWH (May, 2003)

From College Students to Clubwomen: Two Southern Sisters and Their Studies in the North

>From College Students to Clubwomen: Two Southern Sisters and Their Studies in the North

Mary (1866-1936) and Louisa Poppenheim (1868-1957) were two of the first southern women to attend Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Vassar was one of the first of the Seven Sisters schools, which offered an academically rigorous curriculum equivalent to the studies offered at men's colleges. After their graduation, the Poppenheim sisters became important leaders of the white women's club movement in South Carolina and nationally. Joan Marie Johnson's edited collection of letters between the sisters and their mother, Mary Elinor Poppenheim (1837-1915), reveals the ways that their education at a women's college inspired them to immerse themselves in the world of women's organizations. This collection provides details of college life, as well as motherly reports on everyday middle-class life in Charleston, South Carolina, and the behavior expected of southern ladies.

The Poppenheim letters are housed at Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library and are also available on microfilm. Johnson writes that she chose approximately two thirds of the Poppenheim letters for publication, focusing mainly on Mary and Louisa Poppenheim's college experience (1882-1889). Their two younger sisters, Christie (or Kitty) and Ida Poppenheim, also attended Vassar, but they followed a traditional path to marriage and children. Christie and Ida Poppenheim's lives and letters form a small portion of the published collection. Johnson organizes the collection into five chapters, beginning with Mary's first years at Vassar and continuing with Mary and Louisa's years there together. The final chapter follows the Poppenheim sisters as clubwomen, traveling with their mother and corresponding with their younger sisters. *Southern Women at Vassar* ends in 1916, a year after Mary Elinor Poppenheim's death.

The mother-daughter relationship conveyed in these letters is largely without conflict, centered in the "female world of love and ritual" which still bound the sisters and their mother, even though their life experiences and choices differed.[1] Mary Elinor Poppenheim never had the opportunity for a college education, but she was determined that her daughters take advantage of this new experience. Like many college-educated women of their time, the elder Poppenheim sisters chose to remain single. Instead of pushing them apart, however, their single lives bound them even more closely to their mother, whom they lived with and included in their club activities. Another reason for this harmonious mother-daughter relationship is that even though the sisters went to college in the North, they remained true to the ideals of the white South, conducting themselves as southern ladies and upholding the heritage and traditions of the South.

After graduation, Mary and Louisa Poppenheim promoted their southern heritage through the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and *The Keystone*, the magazine that they founded, edited, and published from 1899 to 1914. *The Keystone* included articles about women's clubs, especially the UDC, in South Carolina and other states, along with editorials, fictional pieces, and book reviews. Although *Southern Women at Vassar* contains a letter about the Poppenheim family's visit to Savannah, Georgia, to see Jefferson Davis and his daughter, readers looking for a great deal of southern ideological thought will be disappointed. The southernness of the Poppenheims is subtle. During their years at Vassar, which are the focus of the collection, Mary and Louisa were much more concerned with the day-to-day life of the college–first, their studies, and second, their social life. The issue of race is almost completely absent because Vassar excluded visibly African-American young women and because white supremacy was assumed in the North as well as the South. A few mentions of African American servants in Charleston are the only references the

reader will find.

The Poppenheims' later public life is more revealing with respect to the issue of race. In 1900, when Louisa Poppenheim represented South Carolina at the biennial conference of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, she and other southern white clubwomen worked to prevent the seating of Josephine Ruffin, an African-American delegate from Massachusetts. Joan Marie Johnson has written about the Poppenheims' role in this important racial conflict in her dissertation, "'This Wonderful Dream Nation': Black and White South Carolina Women and the Creation of the New South, 1898-1930."[2] In her article, "'Drill Into Us the Rebel Tradition,"' Johnson also writes about the Poppenheims' role in promoting the myth of the Lost Cause through *The Keystone* and the UDC, but such concerns are relatively unexamined in *Southern Women at Vassar.*[3]

The focus of the Poppenheim sisters' lives from 1882 to 1889 was on their relationships to family and friends, their adjustment to the North, and their dedication to their studies at Vassar. Mary, the older and more serious sister, sometimes lost her confidence under the strain of her studies, and her mother worried constantly about the health and happiness of all of her daughters. Mary Poppenheim wrote in detail about her courses, and Johnson argues that her Vassar education ultimately led her to become an independent thinker, even challenging at least one of her professor's views on the literary characters the young women studied. Mary also immersed herself in artistic work, attendance at church services, and socializing with friends in various clubs.

Although she continually consulted her mother about the best ways to handle social situations as a proper southern lady, Mary secretly expressed an interest in women's rights in a letter to her sister soon after coming to Vassar. Mrs. Poppenheim had warned Mary, "If I were you I would be very retiring and ladylike whenever there is any voting to be done, and avoid any thing to do with a party that savors of woman's rights" (p. 38), but Mary wrote Louisa that during an evening of fortune-telling her friends predicted she would be "a second Susan B. Anthony" as well as the "social queen" of Washington (pp. 41-42). Despite this inclination toward women's rights, the Poppenheim sisters did not express the kind of passion about national political issues that absorbed an earlier generation of northern feminist abolitionist college students like Lucy Stone and Antoinette Blackwell.[4]

Mary and Louisa kept up with current events through magazines and newspapers, but their political ambitions remained in the circle of their peers. Louisa, the more gregarious of the two, was elected president and Mary vice president of the Vassar Student Association. Instead of politics, their letters comment more on the day-to-day aspects of upper-middle-class life, their health, the weather, the cut and cloth of their dresses, sermons heard and concerts attended, excursions to town and countryside, and the planning of a trip to Europe.

Readers interested in the history of southern women's education will be able to compare the Poppenheims' experiences with those of women in southern colleges during the antebellum era and the twentieth century, as discussed in recent books by Christie Farnham and Amy McCandless.[5] Johnson does not find any comparable works on the period from Reconstruction to 1900, making her collection all the more important and pointing to the need for more studies of southern women during this period.

Johnson's introduction skillfully places the Poppenheims in the context of Progressive Era college women, as well as the upper-middle-class world of white society in Charleston. The letters themselves are not as easy to follow since there are gaps between them, and a letter from Mrs. Poppenheim is not necessarily answered by a letter from Mary or Louisa. Johnson's endnotes aid in identifying people and items of late Victorian fashion and culture. The Poppenheims write detailed and lively accounts of such Vassar rituals such as the "Trig Ceremonies, a theatrical production which the sophomore class gave for the freshman class as a kind of rite of passage through trigonometry," for which there is also a splendid photograph of triumphant masked women sporting mathematical symbols on their gymnastics frocks (p. 7). These details of college life and the background these letters provide for the later contributions of the Poppenheim sisters make this collection a welcome addition to the primary materials available in print on southern women.

Notes

[1]. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 53-76.

[2]. Joan Marie Johnson, "'This Wonderful Dream Nation': Black and White South Carolina Women and the Creation of the New South, 1898-1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1997), pp. 239-48.

[3]. Joan Marie Johnson, "'Drill Into Us the Rebel Tradition': The Contest over Southern Identity in Black and

White Women's Clubs, South Carolina, 1898-1930," *Journal of Southern History* 66 (August 2000), pp. 525-62.

[4]. For comparison, see Carol Lasser and Marlene Merrill, eds., *Friends and Sisters: Letters Between Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, 1846-93* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

[5]. Christie Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Amy Thompson McCandless, *The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

_ The new MSN 8: smart spam protection and 2 months FREE* http://join.msn.com/?page=features/junkmail

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: Monica Tetzlaff. Review of Johnson, Joan Marie, ed., *Southern Women at Vassar: The Poppenheim Family Letters, 1882-1916.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7538

Copyright © 2003 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.