

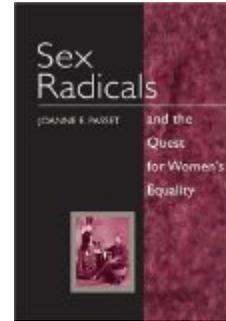
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joanne E. Passet. *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. vii + 259 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02804-5.

Reviewed by Anita Ashendel (Department of History, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis)

Published on H-Indiana (July, 2003)



Grassroots Sex Radicals in the Heartland

Grassroots Sex Radicals in the Heartland

Joanne E. Passet's *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* is an important book for scholars interested in women's history, midwestern history, and reform associations of all types. Her expansive research gives an insightful view to the past while raising important questions for future research. This book should be kept on the bookshelf for handy reference to a wide variety of reformers and reform efforts.

Sex radicals, according to Passet, were "nineteenth-century women and men who did not always call themselves free lovers but who nonetheless challenged customary beliefs about sexual relationships, the institution of marriage, and women's lack of economic, legal, and social rights" (p. 2). Using personal letters and professional articles composed by sex radical advocates between 1853 and 1910, Passet aims to demonstrate both the general scope of the movement and the particular support of midwestern and Great Plains men and women for sex radicals' beliefs. National reformers such as Mary Gove Nichols, Thomas Nichols, Lillian Harmon, Victoria Woodhull, Lois Waisbrooker, Juliet Severance, and Indiana's Thomas Cook, as well as grassroots, rural sympathizers, appear in this book. Passet suggests that sex radicals' ideas represent a bridge connecting ideas articulated by antebellum advocates of women's rights with twentieth-century feminists (p. 1). This bridge spanned six decades and four stages including the creation of a "collective consciousness," the growth of an opposition to

the movement, challenges to government regulation over private lives, and finally, the usurpation of the group by a new generation who focused on eugenics and not on a woman's right to control her body and her destiny (pp. 13-14).

According to Passet, stage one was characterized by the use of periodicals to spread the ideas of the sex radicals and to garner support. Passet posits the formation of a common sex radical identity through extensive correspondence between reformers and through published letters to the editors of these national periodicals. She effectively uses a close examination of the life of Mary Gove Nichols as an introduction to the world of the antebellum sex radical and this identity formation through the radical press. Like Nichols, many antebellum sex radicals also participated in and promoted water cures, spiritualism, utopian experiments, free love communes, the theories of Sylvester Graham, health issues (such as the end of tight lacing), and other reforms of the day. With such a diverse group of people interested in sex radicals' ideas, the periodicals served an essential service by binding together such a diversity of reforms across a wide geographic area.

This is the strongest section of the book and is of particular interest to H-Indiana readers as it introduces Huntsville, Indiana, native Thomas Cook, who published his sex radical periodical, *The Kingdom of Heaven*, in the 1860s. His publication espoused a belief in a quest for "divinely intended mates" or "spiritual affinities" (p. 43).

According to Cook, variety in partners was a phase of life that eventually would be replaced by monogamy with a soul mate. This search would result, ultimately, in healthier children because they would be conceived in complete freedom of choice with a divinely sanctioned partner.

Cook is not the only midwestern sex radical we meet in stage one. One of Passet's main points is that the majority of sex radicals hailed from the Midwest and Great Plains. She attributes this to an individualist orientation of the citizens of those geographic regions. In chapter 2 and in the appendix, Passet cites the periodicals used in her study and her methods for discerning the strength of the movement within those areas. She is appropriately concerned that the letters to the editors of the sex radical press were indeed authentic. Her research discovered the identities of 15 percent of these letter-writers from her sample. These painstaking efforts to discover their identities give voice to the non-elite radical and demonstrate the depth of rural support for sex radicals' ideas.

The remainder of the book moves through the final three stages of the development and decline of the sex radical cause. Beginning with a discussion of the popular conflicts surrounding Victoria Woodhull, the author attempts to show the response of the grassroots radicals she has carefully introduced in the previous chapters to the more elite and well-known members of the sex radical movement. Here the interplay between elite and grassroots radicals is clearly seen through letters which filled the pages of the radical press in defense of more well-known radicals who were attacked in the popular

press. The letters emphasize the extent to which the isolation and hard work of rural life defined control over a woman's body as an important social issue in the heartland. These final sections of the book also demonstrate the extent to which an emphasis on reproductive control carried through the Civil War years and into the last decades of the nineteenth century. As the primary writers and editors of sex radical periodicals died, a new, sympathetic generation of sex radicals did not appear to take their places. Men and a new generation of women in the movement embraced eugenics over older ideas of creating healthy children by the selection of soul mates. Without the editors of the sex radical press, the grassroots radicals of the Midwest and Great Plains lost an important forum to express their beliefs and the method to sustain the movement.

The book includes an extensive twenty-nine-page bibliography which cites numerous primary sources, including a wide variety of sex radical periodicals. Unfortunately for future researchers the names of the institutions that hold these preserved issues are not directly linked with the periodicals. This is a minor problem, but one which makes it more difficult for future researchers to use these sources. One of the major strengths of the book is the weaving together of such a variety of reforms. This raises not only many questions about the individual reforms and reformers, but also more questions of the ties between them. The sources on spiritualism in particular are intriguing. This book should find a wide and appreciative audience.

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 Passet, Joanne E., *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*. H-Indiana, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7961>

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.