

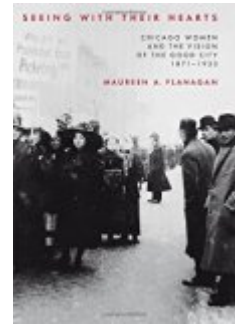
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Maureen A. Flanagan. *Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871-1933*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002. xiv + 319 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09539-4.

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Women and Chicago's Big Shoulders

Maureen Flanagan opens her insightful study, *Seeing with Their Hearts*, with a reference to Carl Sandburg's famous 1916 poem, "Chicago." She notes that Sandburg described "the city of big shoulders" as a masculine, muscular metropolis, concurred and shaped by hard-working male capitalists. Since 1916 this image of Chicago, and other American cities during Gilded Age and Progressive Era, has dominated popular culture and historical scholarship.[1] Although half of the country's urban population, women have received little attention in this traditional interpretation of political history and the "origins of modern America." If mentioned in such works, women are generally depicted only as temptresses, "women adrift," or urban poverty's innocent victims. Flanagan argues that this traditional viewpoint overlooks the important influence of activist women in shaping America's cities and skews the entire field of urban history.

Seeing with Their Hearts focuses on the role of women in Chicago reform politics over six important decades. Flanagan provides strong evidence that women were active participants in Chicago politics, even before they obtained the right to vote. Women "promoted a concept of urban life and good government rooted in social justice, social welfare, and responsiveness to all of the city's residents." This "women's vision" meant that decisions on urban problems were to be made on the basis of what was best for "human betterment" (p. 5). Flanagan recognizes that these activists were not a single political voice.

Nonetheless, she shows that "between 1871 and 1933, a large number of Chicago activist women made common cause in politics despite differences of class, race, and ethnicity" (p. 6). In addition, Flanagan maintains that this "women's vision" was different from that of men and helped to shape urban public policy, especially as it related to public health and social welfare issues. Women "won some battles, but they lost many more." Despite their failures, Flanagan argues that understanding women's alternative vision for the city brings the lives of thousands of women to life, "pushing the 'shoulders' metaphor into a different direction" (p. 10).

Flanagan's view of Chicago reform politics is informed by her own 1987 book on the failed 1907 charter reform effort, and her more recent work on American women's history.[2] *Seeing with Their Hearts* builds on the broadened definition of citizenship introduced by Paula Baker in her pioneering 1984 article, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920." [3] Flanagan's introduction, endnotes, and bibliography provide a handy synthesis of the growing historiography on women and political citizenship in the United States. There have been a number of works in recent years that highlight women's political influence.[4] Flanagan's book is consistent with historiographical trends, but her ability to compare and contrast the work of men and women in a single volume provides additional insights. This classic recognition of gendered differences in women's experience is nothing new. Carl

Degler's *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* and John Mack Faragher's *Men and Women on the Overland Trail* are good examples of works that have long illustrated this point.[5] Flanagan is among the first historians to juxtapose the different political agendas sought by men and women. While activist men focused city policies on profit and business expansion, women sought "to embed into Chicago's political structures the idea of a common welfare best promoted by government.? They ? tried to change the institutions and the purposes of government in ways inimical to what most men wanted from urban government" (p. 119).

Further, Flanagan maintains that women's political interests formed a more complex picture than has been outlined even by historians of women. For example, she agrees with Robyn Muncy that concerns with motherhood and the home were part of women's political agenda, but rejects any suggestion that this was female activists' sole motivation. This may be an overstatement of Muncy's thesis, but the point has validity for expanding interpretations of women's political activism. Flanagan also denies class-based analyses that claim "middle-class white women simply impose[d] an agenda on other women" (p. 119). She sees women's political ideology as primarily informed by their desire to make a better world for all Chicagoans.

The book is divided into three parts: "Crafting the Vision," "Expanding the Vision," and "Campaigning for the Vision." Chapter 1's comparison of the responses of activist men and women to the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 is one of the book's strengths. Flanagan outlines similar distinctions based on gender in chapter 5 which describes the expansion of women's political activism in the city from 1910-1916.

The fire of 1871 and its aftermath "raised to public view the questions and issues that would frame the political debates in Chicago for decades to come." Among middle-class women, organizing for fire relief offered a new experience that forever changed their role in city politics (p. 29). Few women-only organizations had existed in Chicago prior to the city's greatest tragedy. After the fire, women leaders argued that they could not leave the plight of the many homeless women and children solely up to men. Eventually education, child welfare, prohibition, and family issues were also included as part of the female activists' agenda. They also called for better sanitation, the elimination of pollution, improved housing conditions, and the creation of efforts to end unemployment. By the first decade of the twentieth century,

Chicago women "were acting through mass meetings, founding new voluntary organizations, further developing the IWA's [Illinois Women's Alliance] method of direct, personal investigation of municipal problems, and conducting sophisticated political lobbying campaigns" (p. 55). In a 1913 essay, Anna Nichols, who served as one of the earliest superintendents of the Chicago Women's City Club, explained that she and her colleagues were developing a "city sense ... which might be said to come from the hearts of women, a sense that the city is not alone a business corporation" (p. 86). Racial and ethnic discrimination often divided Chicagoans, and women were no exception. But Flanagan claims that women of various groups shared a similar vision for the city's future. Some clubs avoided controversial topics such as birth control, but all embraced the idea that government would be used to create a better society for everyone. Flanagan found a wide range of clubs across racial, ethnic, and class lines that support her argument.

By the 1920s, women had received the right to vote under the Nineteenth Amendment and there was a wide-variety of women-only clubs in Chicago. Flanagan uses women's support for the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act as evidence of their growing influence. She misconstrues, however, the act as health care. Sheppard-Towner was a program of federal and state funding limited to education efforts and diagnostic clinics. It did not provide government funding for health care. This section of the book would have also benefited from more discussion about the reasons why male doctors opposed the extension of Sheppard-Towner. The American Medical Association's Illinois branch was among the most vocal opponents of the program. In addition, why did public health organizations that supported Sheppard-Towner not use women to combat the power of the American Medical Association?

Flanagan correctly argues that few women were able to get elected to political office. She concludes that seeking election through the existing parties dominated by men doomed women's chances. That is a good argument, but why was it so? As Madeline Albright recently remarked in an interview on C-SPAN, there should be "a special place in Hell for women who do not support women." [6] Flanagan has found evidence that women did support female candidates, but why did the shared "women's vision" not lead them to form their own political parties? After suffrage, did female activists view gaining equality within the existing political power structure as more vital than continuing to pursue their "women's vision"? Did working within the structures

established by men leave women in a position of dependency that made it impossible to secure leadership roles, or even real equality?

If, as the popular saying goes, “all politics is local,” studies like Flanagan’s will help historians to answer such questions. *Seeing with Their Hearts* is a welcome contribution to the growing literature examining the meanings of gender and citizenship in the United States. Flanagan writes that she “sought to examine the ideas and actions of activist women so that we can see urban development and contestations for power differently than we have before and recognize that there were alternatives suggested and roads not taken” (p. 195). This book achieves that goal. It is also a work that will help to push urban and political history in new and more inclusive directions.

Notes

[1]. Carl Sandburg, “Chicago,” in *Chicago Poems* (New York: H. Holt, 1916). Some of the standards on urban history in this period include Robert Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives’ Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955); Frederic C. Howe, *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (New York: C. Scribner, 1905); Charles E. Merriam, *Chicago: A More Intimate View of Urban Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1929); Donald L. Miller, *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 16-17; Robert G. Spinney, *City of Big Shoulders: A History of Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 2000); Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform in America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); and Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967). Joanne Meyerowitz’s *path breaking book*, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) was one of the first to recognize women’s growing independence as an important part of urban history, but it is not a study of female political activism.

[2]. Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920,” *American Historical Review*, 89 (June 1984): pp. 620-647.

[3]. Maureen A. Flanagan, *Charter Reform in Chicago*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987); “The City Profitable, The City Livable: Environmental Policy, Gender, and Power in Chicago in the 1910s,” *Journal of Urban History* 22 (January 1996): pp. 163-190; and the introduction to the reprint of Louise De Koven Bowen, *Growing Up with a City* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002 reprint edition).

[4]. Recent examinations of American women and citizenship include: William Chafe, “Women’s History and Political History,” in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* Nancy Hewitt and Suzanne Leebsock, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Ruth Crocker, *Social Work and Social Order: The Settlement Movement in Two Industrial Cities, 1889-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Gayle Gullett, *Becoming Citizens: The Emergence and Development of the California Women’s Movement, 1880-1911* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Sandra Haarsanger, *Bertha Knight Landers of Seattle: Big City Mayor* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African-American Women’s Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Priscilla Murolo, *The Common Ground of Womanhood: Class, Gender, and Working Girls’ Clubs, 1884-1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Elisabeth Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation’s Work: The Rise of Women’s Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[5]. Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and John Mack Faragher, *Men and Women on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, reprint 2001).

[6]. Interview with Madeline Albright at the Miami Book Fair, aired on C-SPAN, November 9, 2003.

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