

H-Net Reviews

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Mary Spongberg. *Writing Women's History since the Renaissance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xii + 306 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-72667-9; \$33.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-72668-6.

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A Herstory of Her Own

In her recent consideration of the gendered nature of the discipline of history, Bonnie G. Smith has astutely observed: “despite the thrust of most historiographic accounts, history for the past two centuries has not mostly been written by men or even been concerned mostly with men.”[1] Mary Spongberg builds upon Smith’s work and repeatedly illustrates the veracity of the above statement in her *Writing Women’s History since the Renaissance*. Spongberg has undertaken a massive project: to demonstrate women’s engagement with history by tracing parallel developments in the history of women and the roles women played in the construction of that history. Spongberg bridges the Atlantic divide by drawing examples from both Western Europe and North America, producing a highly accessible and readable text, succeeding in her stated goal to “provide a broad history of the development of women’s writing from the Renaissance until the twentieth century” (p. 8).

To introduce her survey, Spongberg places her work in the context of historians of women and gender of the last two decades, especially Joan Scott, who have problematized both the methodology of history and its subject matter, clearing the way for a reassessment of history in general, and women’s role in shaping the historical record in particular. In the first two chapters of the work, Spongberg contextualizes her subject with a brief overview of how male-dominated history treated (or often failed to treat) women as subjects of history. The much longer subsequent section illustrates that women’s

historical writing ebbed and flowed with events such as the French Revolution and the reactionary response to it, the suffrage movement, and the professionalization of history as a discipline.

Each chapter is introduced with a brief and user-friendly overview of the chapter’s objectives, especially valuable in Spongberg’s last few chapters, in which she traces the development of women’s history as a discipline within the context of second-wave feminism. Here she provides a particularly helpful introductory overview of the debate within the field generated in the 1970s over issues such as agency, “victim” history, and lesbian history. The work concludes with a consideration of some criticisms of the discipline that have called for the narratives of women’s history to expand beyond the experience of white, middle-class women.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Spongberg’s work is her repeated demonstration that in order to understand women’s relationship to history, we must broaden our understanding of “history writing” to include genres to which society more freely allowed women to contribute, such as historical fiction, letter writing, biography and women’s activist writings, and theory. The book achieves one of its stated goals of considering women’s historical writing as a whole and objectively rehabilitating women’s writing of domestic histories and biographies in the nineteenth century as a conscious strategy responding to the closed doors of academic history.

Further, she demonstrates that women employed specific strategies not only in their writing of history (disguised in gendered disciplines) but in their deployment of that history to promote the suffrage movement, and to demonstrate the history of female economic and sexual oppression.

Spongberg's aim to create a broad survey of women's writing is largely successful, but her scope has resulted in notes that are frustratingly limited and, at least for the pre-modern period, largely secondary. Further, the text also lacks a bibliography that would have been particularly useful to those less familiar with this broad field. Her interests clearly lie in developments in women's history making and writing after the French Revolution, and as such she has perhaps given the pre-modern period too-brief notice. Despite her persistent use of "Renaissance" as a chronological reference point, she follows Joan Kelly Gadol in dismissing that period as being one where patriarchy and humanist traditions limited women's education and therefore their interaction with history. Spongberg celebrates, in later periods, women's flexible application of the ideas and models of history in their writing, yet fails to recognize Italian figures such as humanist Laura Cereta, who often employed historical examples in her public speeches, or Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, who composed a chronicle and necrology about women for her convent of Corpus Domini in Venice.[2] While most would not dispute Spongberg's periodization in emphasizing the eighteenth century as a watershed, an ever-growing collection of scholarship suggests that important strains of female historicism exist throughout western history.

Although Spongberg does an excellent job of discussing developments in history as a discipline that paved the way for feminist and gender analysis, such as developments in social history, she does not complete this contextualization by acknowledging the voice of those historians, male and female, who have, for various reasons, resisted the development of women's history/women's studies as a discipline or particular radical elements within the discipline.[3] In addition, through brief mention of Annalistes such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and the work of David Potter on the Turner thesis, Spongberg hints that, in some cases, the traditions of "male" and "female" historical writing might be inching towards a unified historical dialogue, a theme whose de-

velopment would surely have been interesting and stimulating, particularly given her polarizing organizational schema.[4] Despite these limitations, Spongberg's book provides an excellent and clear introduction to the study of women shapers of history; no doubt this important overview will encourage further scholarship in this rich field.

Notes

[1]. Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 6.

[2]. Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini*, ed. and trans. Daniel Bornstein (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000). These and other titles in the University of Chicago Press's *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series, in addition to countless other works, have nuanced Kelly-Gadol's conclusions in the last decades, suggesting that some women did have a Renaissance, and that history was a sizable part of that experience. In her notes, Spongberg does acknowledge the activities of learned women in the English Renaissance.

[3]. It is surprising, for example, that Spongberg does not reference or discuss Peter Novick's treatment of the controversies of women's history and women's historians in Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 491-511. She also does not address in detail the debates engendered by Women's Studies programs, raised and debated in a good deal of literature, including the controversial and recently revised work of Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Education and Indoctrination in Women's Studies* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

[4]. One area where male and female traditions of scholarship met early in the development of women's and gender studies is surely the history of the family. One example is the work of David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

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