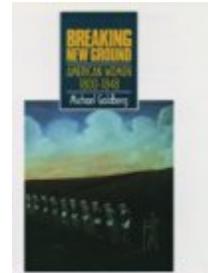


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Goldberg. *Breaking New Ground: American Women 1800-1848*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 143 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-508202-9.

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Michael Goldberg's entry in the Young Oxford History of Women in the United States, recently released in paperback, provides a solid introduction to the lives and experiences of American women during the first half of the nineteenth century. The book and its accompanying promotional literature do not explain exactly what age the "Young History" series is aimed at, but *Breaking New Ground* should prove suitable for ninth through twelfth graders. Goldberg does a fine job of presenting complex issues in language comprehensible to young readers: power relations in marriage and the pitfalls of divorce; the economic hardships of working women; the sexual exploitation of African-American women by male slaveowners, and male resistance of women's broadened participation in antebellum politics and reform. One of the work's major strengths is the large number of marvelous illustrations that supplement the text. Photographs, lithographs, paintings, and reproductions of documents enliven Goldberg's points, and allow young readers to put faces to names and images to ideas. The illustrations work so well that they made me wish that lavish graphics were more economically feasible, and thus more common, in monographs and scholarly publications aimed at adults.

More so than many surveys, Goldberg's work considers the situations of a wide range of women. *Breaking New Ground* includes sections on American Indian and Hispanic women, as well as material on black and white working women, but also covers the more familiar ground of prominent reformers like Emma Willard, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lydia Maria Child. Particularly strong are Chapters Six and Seven, "Stepping Out: Women in Public," and "The Politics of Resistance: Women against Slavery," respectively. In the former, Goldberg lays out the scope of women's involvement

in benevolent causes, including both the customary discussion of middle-class crusades such as female moral reform and temperance and the lesser-publicized story of working-class women's involvement in labor agitation. The latter chapter focuses on abolitionism, detailing black and white women's interest in and commitment to antislavery. Relating the problems that many women had gaining the respect of male abolitionists serves as an admirable segue to a discussion of the emerging women's rights movement and the Seneca Falls conference. Here, Goldberg employs succinct and effective prose to lead his readers through a lively account of this important period in U.S. women's history.

For the most part, *Breaking New Ground* succeeds admirably well, but a few caveats are still in order. The first concerns not Goldberg's text, but the book's conception as a volume for general readers. In "the interest of readability," Oxford chose to "include no discussion of historiography and no footnotes" (p. 138) in the Young History series. This was an understandable and probably wise choice, but it does make it more difficult for young readers unfamiliar with the scholarly literature on U.S. women's history to pursue topics that interest them. The "Further Reading" section at the end helps, but as the works cited are not keyed to chapters, or even broad topics, teenaged readers may be somewhat puzzled when they try to delve deeper into a particular subject. In a similar vein, including dates with the various illustrations would have been both interesting and useful for readers new to the field and period.

My other reservations also revolve around the book's use by its target audience, which I presume to be teenagers. While Goldberg and Oxford eschewed historiographic discussion, they could not help but make

historiographic choices in coverage and approach. These choices may be apparent to scholars, but will probably be opaque to the average, or even exceptional, high school student. If high school students are anything like first year college students, and I suspect they are, a large number will take what they read at face value, especially if it is presented as unproblematic and merely the way things “really” were. This becomes troubling where Goldberg paints with perhaps too broad a brush. His discussion of Spanish soldiers’ mistreatment of California Indians is a case in point. Soldiers were to blame for the destruction of California Indians, Goldberg states, but their “chief weapons were not the sword and gun, Rather, the soldiers decimated the Indian population by spreading syphilis among them ... [t]he Spaniards most often infected Indians by raping Indian women caught in raids” (p. 90). What might a high school reader conclude from this about Spanish soldiers, or about Spaniards generally? While the transmission of venereal disease between Spanish and Indian populations is incontestable, Goldberg’s presentation suggests that Spaniards deliberately used disease to destroy Indian populations, and that Spanish soldiers raped every Indian woman they could get their hands on. Though Goldberg obviously did not intend to promote stereotypes, this type of generalization evokes the Black Legend, or images of Hispanics similar to those employed by advocates of war with Mexico in the 1840s. For professional historians, Goldberg’s meaning and intent are clear and relatively unproblematic. I fear that they would be less so for a young, inexperienced reader.

A related concern arises from Goldberg’s laudable attempt to include women of varying ethnic and racial groups in his account of American women. Though he takes pains to present material on African-Americans, American Indians, and Hispanic-Americans, Goldberg devotes the most attention to white middle-class women. As *Breaking New Ground* is a survey, and thus heavily dependent on secondary sources, this preoccupation is not surprising, given the relative quantities of research published on white middle-class women and all other groups.

Goldberg cannot and should not be taken to task for lacunae in the existing body of knowledge about American women. But again, considering the target audience for *Breaking New Ground*, some efforts at explaining why there is so much discussion of one group and so little of others, or why black, Indian, Hispanic, and working-class women are in some ways measured against their white, middle class counterparts, would be in order. Readers learn, for instance, that in matters of premarital intercourse, “many black couples exhibited as much restraint as middle-class couples up North” (p. 90). True enough, but in the context of a work that lapses into discussion of middle-class white women even when attempting to do justice to other groups, this may send the subtle message that the middle-class experience *should* be the benchmark against which all else is measured. Another example is Goldberg’s handling of women in the American west. In “Conquerors and Conquered,” a sixteen page chapter covering the experience of western migrant, American Indian, and Hispanic women, the author devotes four pages to Narcissa Whitman. In light of the wealth of material on middle class women and the relative paucity of scholarship on women of other ethnic, racial and class groups, it would be nearly impossible to avoid this pitfall completely. But a specific acknowledgement to young readers that this coverage reflects the current state of knowledge rather than a transcendent value judgment on the merits of various groups would be salutary.

Perhaps this level of caution and solicitude for high school-aged readers is unnecessary. In any case, *Breaking New Ground* represents a step forward in presenting the history of American women to young readers. Though it may require some explication and contextualizing by instructors, it will doubtless interest students in the lives and contributions of American women.

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