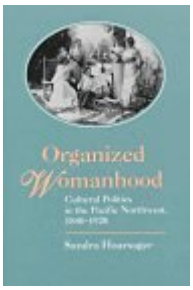
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sandra Haarsager. *Organized Womanhood: Cultural Politics in the Pacific Northwest 1840-1920.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. xiii + 427 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-2974-7.

Reviewed by Tom White

Published on H-Women (January, 1999)

This study is focused regionally on the impact of women's groups in the Pacific Northwest, delineated here as Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. Sandra Haarsager surveys the territorial period from the arrival of EuroAmericans to the early twentieth century, followed by a brief concluding chapter on the legacy of "organized womanhood" following the Progressive Era to our own time.

As suggested in the title, the author contends that women's clubs and the culture they spawned had a significant influence on politics in a politically and culturally volatile region. "From scattered beginnings in the nineteenth century," Haarsager insists, "the woman's study club movement mushroomed into a major social force before the end of the century, spreading education, culture, and changes in the legal and political system like spores on the wind (p. 3)."

Increasingly and despite the fact that women, lacking the right to vote, could not form a voting bloc, women's clubs engaged energetically in a wide series of reforms, informing public policy-making on issues ranging from public libraries to worker protections. At the same time, women "used clubs for identity formation, both as women and as part of a group bounded by class, by culture, even by the movement itself (p. 5)." Indeed, there existed "a chain in the Northwest linking the WCTU [Women's Christian Temperance Union], the study club and civic activism.... Their legacy enabled the Northwest to lead the nation in giving women the right to vote, in improving women's legal status, in passing landmark labor legislation and other measures well before the rest of the nation took those steps. The cadre of leaders that emerged from the club movement became leaders of other social movements such as suffrage and consumer rights (p. 5)."

In regional and national history, women have seldom received credit for their achievements, which far surpassed their ascribed roles of "gentle tamers" of a popularized wild and woolly West. For all that, Haarsager does not ignore her subjects' shortcomings. Clubs failed generally to include women of color. Few moved beyond traditional female roles as caretakers, teachers, and/or moral guardians. Though they sought equal rights and protections for women, women's clubs seldom strayed radically from traditional notions of cultural, often middle class conformity.

The roots of the Pacific Northwest's club movement lay in its early territorial days. The Columbia Maternal Association was the first of the region's women's clubs. Founded in 1838 in (current) southeastern Washington on the Walla Walla River, the first club represented the efforts of Narcissa Whitman and other missionary wives. Like subsequent groups, this was a study club devoted to cultural and spiritual issues. By the time of the Civil War, the study clubs were evolving with a new sense of benevolence and social activism, a blend that meshed well with various types of support for the Union war effort.

The relative cultural openness in the far northwest presented obstacles, as well as opportunities, both for those community leaders who sought innovation and reform and for those who were determined to recreate the kinds of communities and cultures that they had left behind. Despite that tension, common throughout the West, the Pacific Northwest proved fertile ground for a plethora of social movements, including the region's strong advocacy of women's rights. There, eager audiences greeted Frances Willard, Carrie Chapman Catt, Susan B. Anthony, and many others on their western campaigns for gender equity.

Much of this energy came to be harnessed by the WCTU, the first significant club network connecting and mobilizing the entire region. It provided a sense of common purpose, served as a mentoring organization for many individuals to acquire skills, and afforded a general social and public purpose to its members, many of whom embraced other, broader social issues. Tensions increased, of course, as many moved beyond self-improvement and temperance issues.

Few challenged racial bars, but a growing number of women did breach class barriers in their concern for working women and children after the turn of the century. "Especially in Oregon and Washington, but in Idaho as well, women's clubs surveyed, mobilized, and lobbied for working hour and wage laws to protect workers, especially women and children," Haarsager argues (p. 230). The most visible legacy in this regard was the United States Supreme Court's decision in Muller v. Oregon and the famous Louis Brandeis brief. In that finding, the court upheld the state's right to regulate women's wages and hours. In the wake of that historic finding, clubwomen went to work, building mechanisms to effectively enforce the law.

Many former and current clubwomen immersed themselves in the various other causes and campaigns of the new Progressive Era. Foremost among their concerns, predictably perhaps, was the right to vote. "Suffrage for women in the Pacific Northwest fit into a continuum of 'progress,'" the author explains, "a progression and expansion of government that made private institutions public, created more rational state policies, imposed new civic priorities, adapted findings from the new fields of psychology and sociology, and reaped the benefits of technological change in 'domestic science' (p. 280)." They joined together to establish the broader and more powerful General Federation of Women's Clubs to effectively lobby for a wide range of reforms. In addition to suffrage, women worked hard for new marriage and divorce laws, child protection, pure food laws, libraries, conservation, and labor regulations.

As government increasingly assumed such roles--the goal toward which so many had worked--and new developments occurred in the wake of the First World War, much of the vitality of the clubwomen's movement waned. "The Red Scare, labor unrest, social changes, and the backlash against all women" in the 1920s "all took their toll" (p. 336), and the movement stalled. Nonetheless, its legacy was significant and lasting despite the cultural changes that resulted after the decline of the Victorian ideal.

This is a fine addition to our understanding of women's roles, exercised through the club movement, on regional politics. It is well researched,

even encyclopedic in some ways. The author writes clearly and includes useful vignettes of important individuals, including Narcissa Whitman, May Arkwright Hutton, Abigail Scott Duniway, and fourteen others. In a useful appendix, Haarsager includes information on women's study clubs not covered in detail within her text. This book is recommended for general readers and specialists interested in women, politics, and the Pacific Northwest from the missionary period to the close of the Second World War.

Citation: Tom White. Review of Haarsager, Sandra. *Organized Womanhood: Cultural Politics in the Pacific Northwest 1840-1920.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2702