H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrea G. Radke-Moss. *Bright Epoch: Women and Coeducation in the American West.* Women in the West Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xii + 352 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-1942-7.

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Published on H-Education (March, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

In *Bright Epoch*, Andrea G. Radke-Moss explores the gender dynamics, intellectual life, and social atmosphere at several coeducational western land-grant colleges in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States.[1] Radke-Moss argues that these institutions provided a setting where women could push the boundaries of their gender roles. In education, extracurricular activities, politics, and social life, "women succeeded in negotiating new spaces of gendered inclusion and equality" (p. 2).

Radke-Moss's subject matter and opinions of coeducation make this work a unique undertaking. In choosing to analyze gender at land-grant institutions in the western United States, the author is studying a subject that has not previously gained much attention from leading scholars of women's higher education.[2] Moreover, she assumes that the opening of college doors to women was "inherently progressive for women," and asserts that the late nineteenth century was indeed a "bright epoch" for women's higher education at her chosen institutions (p. 12). She thus challenges other historians who have emphasized the preservation of traditional women's gender roles within coeducational colleges. Indeed, Radke-Moss stresses: "Unlike other historical studies of women and coeducation--most of which have typically focused on separation and segregation--this study is not looking for gender discrimination around every campus corner" (p. 12). Yet everything was not that easy or linearly progressive. There were continually "competing forces of separation and inclusion for women," even if some of the instances of separation appeared to be self-imposed (p. 12).

Many different topics in the history of education and gender are taken on in this three-hundred-page study of student life at Iowa Agricultural College (IAC), the University of Nebraska, Oregon Agricultural College, and Utah Agricultural College. In the first two chapters, Radke-Moss examines the discourse and practices of coeducation from the view of the administrators and the students. In the remaining six chapters, she describes the student experience in many different arenas: literary societies, social life, course work, athletics and physical training, campus military regiments, and women's rights activism. A short conclusion reviews some of the previous chapters and cites a drop in enrollment after 1900 and a reaction against women's higher education.

The historian uses a variety of sources, including student newspapers, diaries, school catalogues, organization files, and college directories, to construct the history of women's higher educa-

tion. For the most part, Radke-Moss succeeds in illustrating the various ways that women were able to take advantage of educational and social opportunities, participate in new endeavors, and challenge some gender expectations of their time. The above sources enable her to do so. She also returns to the tension between separation and inclusion, which complicates many of her topics.

One chapter that illuminates the tension of separation and inclusion, or perhaps varying notions of female propriety, is the chapter on literary societies. College women were able to participate in societies alongside men or create their own clubs. Yet women's topics of debate were often limited, and even in mixed clubs, women might only debate other women. If the debates were between both sexes the topics were often altered to those that were deemed appropriate for women or mixed company. Nevertheless, hinting at an argument she develops later on, Radke-Moss writes that "through literary society debating activities, female land-grant students helped to negotiate a new culture of women's public political expression" (p. 91).

Another interesting example of women pushing gender boundaries was in their involvement in military drills. Women believed that they ought to be included in military drill, which was mandatory for their male counterparts under the Morrill Act of 1862, and petitioned for their own brigades. According to the author, "women students took their citizenship to a new level of inclusion and republican activity" through this practice (p. 225). These groups were particularly notable at IAC from the late 1870s into the late 1890s and for a shorter time at the University of Nebraska. Women from the Iowa brigade even participated at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, to the awe of some fairgoers. At IAC, the formation of military brigades was related to suffrage for the argument was often stated that women should not be enfranchised because they were not subject to military service. Yet these groups proved to be short-lived and dwindled by the declaration of the Spanish-American War, likely subsumed into departments of physical education, which was a different type of advance for women. Additionally, once World War I was declared in the United States, the college women tended to perform within traditional gender roles.

In seeking to illustrate the many benefits of early coeducation, Radke-Moss must contend with the fact that women were often receiving different education than men, taking mostly domestic science courses. This was indeed an "institutionalized form of gender separation" (p. 143). However, the pendulum swung both ways, and she finds many opportunities and benefits within this restricted education.[3] She frames home economics as a practical specialization that was created "in spite of criticism from elitist educators," contending that it "brought a new discourse that added professional legitimacy to women's housework" (pp. 144, 150-151). Additionally, women were able to enter academia as professors in domestic science, pushing the limitations on women's career goals. There were also some efforts to provide women with means to self-support through courses in millinery, hostelry management, and dressmaking. Another point that is often overlooked, Radke-Moss holds, is that women were able to take a variety of courses in mixed-sex classrooms before separating into their specializations. Thus, they were enrolled in biology, chemistry, botany, English, and business courses. Some women also chose other fields of specialization, such as law, commerce, and pharmacology.

In the last chapter, Radke-Moss ties women's educational advances to reform movements and ultimately, suffrage. One would assume that the political outlook might be bright because of general knowledge that western states granted women's suffrage rather early. However, the colleges under study were located in states that were among the last to grant suffrage.[4] Moreover, students did not actively take part in "formal activist

groups in the traditional sense" (p. 288). Yet Radke-Moss argues that the students were, in fact, politically active through their editorials, speeches, and debates. Extracurricular activities also provided cooperation between the sexes and inclusion for women in speaking, voting, and some leadership roles. Thus, the author makes the claim: "Land-grant students practiced an active microcosm of democracy that showed the realistic possibility of an inclusive political culture supported by a vocal and intelligent female electorate" (p. 288).

Even as Radke-Moss returns to the main idea of inclusion and separation, people are likely to have different opinions about whether or not this was a "bright epoch" for women, whether domestic science offered advances for women, and whether the students really participated in "an active microcosm of democracy" (p. 288). At one point, the author seems to express the argument that the colleges offered women an "equal education." She describes Adonijah S. Welch, the president of IAC, to be an advocate of equal education, even as he supported different education for women that was severely limited. The author writes, "President Welch believed in equal education for women, but he also believed the course work for women should be specially adapted to women's particular roles in society and the home.... He was revolutionary in his demand for equal education" (pp. 25-26). Certainly, Welch's 1869 speech, which the author quotes, was a call for the inclusion of women in higher education but it was not to be on equal terms with men.

Radke-Moss offers a detailed view of women's lives at land-grant colleges in the western United States, adding new research in the field of the history of education. Along with Susan Rumsey Strong's work on Alfred University's coeducation practices, ***Thought Knows No Sex: Women's Rights at Alfred University*** (2008), ***Bright Epoch*** sheds light on less-trodden terrain in the history of women's higher education, shifting the emphasis away from private women's colleges in the eastern United States. Both books seek to illustrate that women had greater educational opportunities at coeducational institutions than has been formerly realized and that not all such institutions were inherently hostile to women. Radke-Moss also makes the effort to show that women in the western United States took the opportunity to pursue a high-quality postsecondary education and gained increased autonomy over their futures.

Notes

[1]. Land-grant colleges were created under the 1862 Morrill Act, which granted thirty thousand acres of federal land to each state. The land was to be sold, and the proceeds were to go toward creating public colleges that were to emphasize mechanical and agricultural education.

[2]. Among the leading books on women's experience in higher education are Barbara Miller Solomon, ***In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Lynn D. Gordon, ***Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). They do not give extensive coverage of land-grant universities in the western United States.

[3]. For criticism of domestic science, see Jill Kerr Conway, "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States," ***History of Education Quarterly*** 14 (1974): 1-12.

[4]. The state of Utah was an exception, granting suffrage in 1896. However, Radke-Moss does not see a connection between early suffrage and women's education or rights in Utah. She says "that act had more to do with Mormon power structures and fears of federal government intrusion than women's education progress" (p. 275).

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