Bridging Environmental and Women’s History: The Progressive Crusade of Mira Lloyd Dock

In her biography of conservationist Mira Lloyd Dock, Susan Rimby fuses environmental and women’s history, highlighting the often overlooked connection between the two subgenres. Building on Carolyn Merchant’s idea of the Progressive conservation movement’s “gendered dialectic” and the work of Dorcetta Taylor and others, Rimby uses the life of Dock to further examine the interrelationship between class, gender, and conservation during the Progressive Era.[1] Rimby is particularly concerned with questions revolving around labor divisions in the conservation movement and how these divisions were influenced by access to education and gender. Dock was educated as a botanist and during her career was involved in the botany and conservation lecture circuit, the City Beautiful movement, women’s clubs, and the women’s rights movement. Her crowning achievement, as the title of the book suggests, was her involvement in the development of Pennsylvania’s forestry movement. Dock served on the State Forestry Commission from 1901 to 1913, which made her the first woman in Pennsylvania to hold a government position and the first woman in the world to act on a public forestry commission. Rimby states that the story of Dock’s life is a valuable addition to conservation history for several main reasons. Firstly, it highlights conservation initiatives at the state and local levels rather than the federal level. Secondly, it brings East Coast conservation actors to the forefront of conservation history. Thirdly, Dock’s life enables an examination of the way in which women took part and influenced the Progressive conservation movement. Dock’s example, Rimby contends, also allows for comparisons and connections to be made between the histories of the conservation movement, women’s organizations, and women’s suffrage.

The challenge of any biographical endeavor is to successfully demonstrate the substantive significance of one’s subject matter. Rimby achieves her goal of situating Dock’s life within a conservation and women’s history context. She accomplishes this by doing more than simply connecting Dock to well-known conservation figures like Gifford Pinchot and J. Horace McFarland. Using manuscript and archival collections mainly from the Pennsylvania State Archives and other in-state institutions as well as the Mira Lloyd Dock Papers at the Library of Congress, Rimby situates Dock in the conservationist
and activist atmosphere of her time. Her greatest accomplishment throughout the book is to effectively illustrate the way in which Dock was still mired in the social norms of her time, sometimes holding beliefs about gender roles that may make the modern-day feminist cringe.

Rimby connects Dock’s involvement in the botany lecture circuit, which acted as a catalyst for her involvement in Pennsylvanian forestry and conservation movements, to gendered rules of acceptability. A woman lecturing about botany was deemed acceptable, Rimby demonstrates, because the protection of plants was a nurturing, and thus feminine, endeavor. This interlinkage between Dock’s involvement in conservation and other reform movements and traditional gender roles is consistent throughout the biography. At the Pennsylvania State Forest Academy, for instance, Dock adopted a role as surrogate mother, looking out for the welfare of “the boys” who were attending the school (p. 72). Despite demonstrating the same kind of unsentimental, utilitarian approach to forestry and conservation exhibited by Pinchot and many of her male colleagues, Dock’s participation in the conservation movement was also defined by her gender. For example, Rimby quotes one of Dock’s fellow State Forestry Commission members as saying, “with a woman’s instinct, she saw the need of measures which escaped notice of other members of the commission, and with a woman’s tact she led to their adoption” (p. 91). Even Dock insisted that the field of forestry was essentially a man’s realm. Training in botany or horticulture was ideal, she believed, because it enabled women to both marry and raise children while simultaneously fostering a career.

This connection between Dock’s gender and the trajectory of her career is most prevalent in the connecting theme of bridge leadership. Rimby writes that “bridge leaders have significant leadership experience but are often denied prominent, formal leadership roles because of gender or other personal characteristics. Bridge leaders initiate movements, recruit followers unknown to formal leaders, and perform effectively at the grassroots level. Bridge leaders, however, generally lack formal institutional or organizational power” (p. 47). Yet Dock’s accomplishments are still laudable, particularly because Dock did not begin college until she was forty-two after nearly two decades of taking care of her younger siblings. To have accomplished so much as a woman in the early twentieth century and in the latter half of her life is truly remarkable and a point that Rimby could have driven home more thoroughly. The book starts off slowly in chapter 1 with a detailed description of Dock’s family and upbringing. This material strays from the what is presented, in the title, as the main aim of the biography—linking Dock’s life to the Progressive Era conservation movement—and could have been condensed into a couple of pages without losing critical information. This critique can be applied generally to the entire book; ideally, coming from an environmental history perspective, the portions discussing Dock’s involvement in the conservation movement could have been more in-depth with less attention given to other periods of her life. However, the possible restraints placed on the researcher by source availability and the nature of biographical writing lessen the impact of this stylistic issue. Overall, Rimby’s treatment of Dock’s involvement in the conservation movement could have been more in-depth with less attention given to other periods of her life. However, despite these restraints, the book enriches both environmental and women’s history by providing the story of a remarkable woman who rose above many of the constraints of her time to effect positive change on the society in which she lived.

Note


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