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A Wealth of Pennsylvania Women’s Experiences

In her 2000 book, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940*, historian Sarah Deutsch stated that as Boston women entered public spaces, they “asserted their own sense of their rights and their own visions of the city.”[1] Marion W. Roydhouse’s *Women of Industry and Reform: Shaping the History of Pennsylvania, 1865-1940* illuminates how Pennsylvania’s diverse female citizenry engaged in similar work within and outside of the home across a wide range of the commonwealth’s communities and landscapes. She explains how Pennsylvania’s women negotiated two complementary trends from the mid-nineteenth to twentieth centuries: industrialization and the subsequent shift of population from rural areas to urban centers. In doing so, she explores a wide range of women’s productive activities and reform projects. Where possible, the author “views change through the eyes of individual women and listens to their words” (p. 8). This can be difficult to achieve in a book that primarily synthesizes other secondary works, yet Roydhouse’s effective use of quotations and anecdotes allows us to understand the joys, goals, and challenges of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Pennsylvania women.

The book is organized both chronologically and thematically. Roydhouse begins, in chapter 1, “Women in a State of Transition,” by analyzing women who experienced the dislocations of the Civil War, the continuing industrialization of the state, rural-to-urban migration, and immigration. Chapters 2, 3, and 4, covering the years between 1880 and 1920, concentrate on such themes as women’s work, Progressive Era reform efforts, and female participation in the labor movement. Chapter 5, which deals with the years 1890-1940, examines cross-class and cross-racial alliances during the Progressive Era, the 1920s, and the Great Depression. In her epilogue, Roydhouse discusses women’s lives and labor during World War II and the early postwar era.

Roydhouse deftly weaves together the private and public lives of Pennsylvania’s women. While analyzing life in coal-mining communities, for example, she shows how the unpaid household labor of wives and daughters supplemented the inadequate wages of husbands, fathers, and sons. Coal community women were keenly aware of the way industrialists exploited their menfolk and they encouraged resistance. Throughout the state, miners’ wives and daughters visibly and courageously supported unionization efforts by haranguing strikebreakers, walking picket lines, and keeping house in the tent communities of the evicted. In ethnically diverse industrial centers, for example, cultural mores governed both family relationships and employment possibilities. Philadelphia’s Italian women, who were used to close supervision by family, worked in neighborhood factories before marriage, and after marriage labored on piecework at home supplied by the local padrone.

In fact, a major strength of the book is the way in which the author uncovers the rich racial, ethnic, class, geographic, and occupational diversity of Pennsylvania’s women. She examines the jobs—textile worker, domestic
servant, clerical worker, or shop girl—that working-class women took to contribute to a family economy or to support themselves. Roydhouse also explores the differential labor markets, based on race and ethnicity that constrained women’s employment options. These included not only blue-collar labor markets, but also those that employed well-educated, middle-class teachers and social workers who wanted to exercise their minds and contribute to humanity.

She also analyzes a wide variety of women’s volunteer activities and correctly grounds the origins of women’s public activism in, for example, long-standing Quaker reform work; friendship and kin networks; and familiarity with male-dominated organizations, such as the United Mine Workers of America. Within various chapters, she analyzes several institutions, including abolitionist organizations, neighborhood associations, settlement houses, suffrage groups, women’s clubs, and unions. Roydhouse also explores national historical events in which Pennsylvania women played major roles, such as funding the Women’s Building at the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 and participating in the Shirtwaist Workers Strike of 1909. Despite attempts to thwart them, the commonwealth’s women exposed racial and class inequality, cleaned up blighted neighborhoods, established services for immigrant women and children, and battled for their own economic and political rights.

Among the most fascinating subjects covered by the author are the cross-class alliances and interactions of the Progressive Era and the 1920s. In the Woman’s Trade Union League, middle- and working-class women joined forces to improve safety conditions, hours, and wages. Within the Kensington Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry, wealthier women provided educational and leadership opportunities for those less advantaged. However, as Roydhouse also explains, “cross-class coalitions between workers and wealthier women were fraught with difficulty” (p. 77). Working-class women resisted when “friendly visitors” tried to impose middle-class values on their clients. In Philadelphia, tensions developed between the Kensington YWCA officers and the women they served during the 1934 general textile strike. Further, despite the Philadelphia YWCA’s efforts to promote racial harmony, branches in the city remained segregated.

As is the case with all good histories, this one generates questions for future historians. While Roydhouse carefully documents reform work in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, she leaves one wondering about the smaller industrial towns and rural county seats. Did such communities as Reading, Carlisle, or Wilkes-Barre develop female voluntary associations like those of the larger cities? If so, did they also develop cross-class alliances? Other questions emerge from Roydhouse’s study of woman suffrage. Did a feminist movement coalesce in Pennsylvania after the ratification of the Twentieth Amendment? Similarly, how did women involved in racial justice organizations carry on with their missions during the post-World War II years, as women assumed new jobs and moved to the suburbs?

Women of Industry and Reform contributes greatly to our knowledge of Pennsylvania history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In her synthesis of women’s lives, labor, and activism, Roydhouse adds an important dimension to understanding the politics, economy, and civic life of the commonwealth.

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