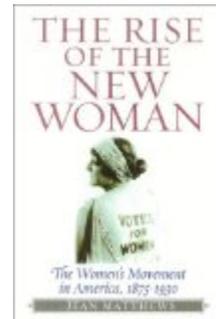




Jean V. Matthews. *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2003. 211 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-501-1; \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-500-4.

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Who Was the New Woman and What Did She Want?

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At the turn of the twentieth century the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) issued the *Women's Century Calendar*, which ranked as "the greatest achievement of the woman movement within the century ... the 'personal liberty' which is now conceded to women" (p. 4). Optimistically, the NAWSA calendar announced that women now enjoyed the freedom "to do, to say, to go, and to be what one pleases" (p. 4), undoubtedly prompting readers to question why women still did not possess the right to vote.

Jean Matthews, professor emeritus at the University of Western Ontario, explores the efforts of the "New Woman" to "do" and "be" what she pleased in the rapidly changing American society of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Matthews defines the "New Woman" as a crucial "transitional" figure who helped expand women's roles, and took advantage of new educational and professional opportunities, yet never achieved social, economic, or political equality with men. Matthews's lively narrative history of the American women's movement began with an earlier volume, also published in the American Ways Series, covering the years from 1828 to 1876.[1] Like the first book, *The Rise of the New Woman* employs the familiar story of suffrage activism as a framework for engaging in a more wide-ranging narrative about such topics as the evolution of feminist ideas and actions, the role of motherhood in women's lives, and the impact of science and religion on

American women. In other words, the "women's movement" from 1875 to 1930 was about more than suffrage.

In chapter 1 (there is no introduction), "The Woman's Era," Matthews explains that the term "New Woman" first originated in the mid-1890s, and became a focus of discussion as "a new type of female personality" by the turn of the century (p. 13).[2] The "New Woman" of this early-twentieth-century public discourse, Matthews explains, was "young, well educated, probably a college graduate, independent of spirit, highly competent, and physically strong and fearless" (p. 13). But the "New Woman," Matthews explains, was more than just a "bachelor girl" on a bicycle. Not all new women were young and single. Many were middle class, while others were decidedly wealthy. A few joined the Socialist Party, others joined women's clubs.

All, however, faced a changed America in which "far less of the world was off limits to women than it had been fifty years earlier" (p. 35). Their contact and interaction with each other was fundamental to the "new consciousness" that was developing "among a sizeable portion of American women" (p. 4). Suffrage work was but one expression of this new consciousness. Most women, Matthews explains, found other routes to "a more active engagement with the wider world around them" (p. 4). Thousands of women joined women's clubs for the purpose of "intellectual self-improvement" (p. 15). The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), for instance, claimed 150,000 members, organized into local

chapters, by 1892, giving many women the opportunity to participate directly in political activity.

Admittedly, only certain women were in a position to take advantage of many of these new opportunities. While Matthews acknowledges the organizational efforts of African-American, working class, and rural women, the “new women” remained largely white, urban, and financially secure. The formal suffrage organizations—and most other activities—remained strictly segregated by race, and less formally segregated by class, although Matthews addresses, in chapter 2 (“The New Woman and the New Politics”), some of the efforts at cross-class alliances, specifically through the efforts of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL). Matthews also describes some of the other expressly political activities of the Progressive Era, from the National Congress of Mothers to the National Consumers’ League. Implicit in Matthews’s work, in this chapter and throughout the book, is a recognition of the tension between public and private life that these “new women” faced. Matthews describes the conflicts—home/family v. career/activism—that confronted many women, yet does not engage in a theoretical or historiographical discussion of the “separate spheres” paradigm or the “public/private” dichotomy that has informed so much recent debate on the writing of women’s history.[3]

That is not to say Matthews ignores the internal lives of her “new women.” In chapter 3, “Thinking about the Woman Question,” Matthews focuses on some of the “many thoughtful feminists” who “were drawn to the task of explaining, not just changing, women’s situation” (p. 67). In order to explain women’s traditionally subordinate position in American society, for example, feminist thinkers took on the subjects of science and religion. To illustrate this point, as she does throughout her book, Matthews provides us with examples from both easily recognized figures, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in this case, and less well-remembered women. Matilda Joselyn Gage, for instance, attacked Christian churches for subordinating women in her 1893 publication *Woman, Church and State*.

Similarly, chapter 4, “Feminism and the Problem of Sex,” exposes the internal thought processes of new women who defined feminism through the concept of “Liberation” (p. 103). To achieve liberation, women should address their “psyches” and personal lives, including their sexuality. A younger generation of new women, Matthews explains, “consciously distinguished themselves from the older suffragists” whom they be-

lieved were “too superficial in their analysis of women’s needs” (p. 104). Matthews focuses much of this discussion on the desire many early-twentieth-century women felt to pursue conventional heterosexual relationships with men, leading to marriage and children. This new generation of new women expected somehow to maintain the same professional and career opportunities as their unmarried female colleagues. Some of the concerns and complaints voiced by such women echo with great poignancy contemporary debates about combining career and family. Matthews provides us with numerous examples of highly educated and accomplished women, such as Dr. Dorothy Reed, who suffered career setbacks upon marriage. In Wisconsin, where Reed’s new husband found an academic appointment, she was unable to continue both her medical practice and her research work (p. 99). The potential for liberation was everywhere by the early-twentieth century—from the battle for birth control, to driving an automobile and smoking a cigarette—but so were the limitations placed on women.

The movement revitalized, however, in the second decade of the twentieth century, as described in chapter 5, “War and Victory.” Suffrage leaders made a concerted effort to recruit wealthy women and younger women to the cause, and made some successful attempts to reach out to working class women as well. The movement also targeted male voters for the first time, taking advantage of the overall climate of Progressive reform. In 1917, World War I brought both challenges and opportunities, but ultimately, as Matthews states, when President Woodrow Wilson “declared that the conflict was a war for democracy, he played into the suffragists’ hands” (p. 152). While Matthews acknowledges the ways in which the final suffrage victory has been downplayed by some historians, she concludes that its real significance becomes evident only after recognizing “the doggedness of the resistance to granting it and the length of time it took to obtain it” (p. 157).

Chapter 6, “After the Vote,” deals with the difficulties and disappointments faced by women in the immediate post-suffrage victory era, while chapter 7, “The Fate of the ERA,” is a very brief postscript on the fate of the Equal Rights Amendment with some concluding thoughts about equality, liberty, and feminism (p. 185). Some feminists saw the 1920s as a time when “now that suffrage was won, women could pursue what they were really after,” defined by Crystal Eastman as “freedom” (p. 161). Others were troubled by the growing divisions within the movement over the controversial Equal Rights Amendment. Matthews envisions this period as a time of

transformation or transition, not failure. American society was much changed, and after all, women had finally earned “formal equality of citizenship” (p. 181). And yet it was equally clear that men still held the reins of economic and political power in the United States.

This engagingly written work of synthesis is a very nice length and tone for classroom use. Matthews skillfully inserts lively and pertinent direct quotes, and emphasizes people and personalities (readers are expertly introduced to many individual women throughout the text) to illustrate complex ideas and to advance the story. She fashions her narrative from a wide-ranging bibliography of secondary sources, including both classics of scholarship on American women’s history and some of the most recent new scholarship. She supplements this literature with some important document collections and the published works of a few of the women about whom she writes in the text. All the sources are published, and therefore easily accessible. Unfortunately, however, there are no footnotes or endnotes, only a fifteen-page bibliographic essay on sources at the end of the narra-

tive, which may make it difficult to track down the original sources of some of those wonderful quotes and stories. Overall, however, this work will be appealing and informative for general audiences, useful and accessible for students, and an informative and enjoyable brief and general overview for scholars in the field.

Notes

[1]. Jean Matthews, *Women’s Struggle for Equality: The First Phase, 1828-1876* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997).

[2]. The origins and definition of the term “New Woman” has been the subject of at least two recent discussions on H-Women. See discussion threads at H-Women@h-net.msu.edu in May/June 1997. Thanks to Tammy Proctor for alerting me to another recent H-Women discussion thread (September 2003) on this topic.

[3]. See just one recent example in the forum “Women’s History in the New Millennium: Rethinking Public and Private,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15 (Spring 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

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