Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Bonnie G. Smith. *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998. Pp. 320.

One is often embarrassed by the hyperbole on book jackets: a mundane work of history will be described as "gripping," with guarantees that readers will be "enlightened" as well as "shocked" by what is "bound to become a classic." My difficulty is how to convey that, for once, all these things are true about Bonnie Smith's extraordinary exploration of the discipline of history as it emerged in the nineteenth century and evolved in the twentieth.

In this fascinating study, the product of several decades of research, writing, and dialogue with colleagues, Smith unpacks the anti-feminine prejudices that have been part and parcel of history's development as a university discipline and a profession. *The Gender of History* takes us from the amateur history written by early nineteenth-century women, through the exclusionary practices of university men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to a consideration of women professional historians and of twentieth-century "modernism, relativism, and everyday life."

What could conceivably be "shocking" in such an account? First, the idea of "narcohistory," a genre predating scientific history, practiced by women, and designed to alleviate pain. Smith considers Germaine de Staël perhaps the most famous practitioner of this genre. In her writing

> history explicitly confronted the gulf between the living and the dead; it dealt with ghosts and tombs, but also with liberty and community, while it floated along on huge doses of opium.... Historical genius entailed a set of emotions, psychic states, and bodily feelings that present-day historians have rejected....

Like Coleridge and Sir Walter Scott, the historian-genius used drugs to gain access to the historical spirit. The historian was also embodied: history was erotic, and detachment not the name of the game.

> Through the physically present historian, de Staël, the so-called constitutionalist or liberal, questions Cartesianism and the disembodied rights-bearing acquisitive individual as the fundament of either history or the nation.

These statements give some notion of the complexity of Smith's explorations. She acknowledges there are many ways of understanding Germaine de Staël. Smith's interpretation emphasizes trauma, the subject of her chapter dealing with the birth of amateur history, consisting "of something quite extraordinary: the writing of multiple traumas, and not only those of war and revolution." Among other traumas experienced by nineteenth-century women was the loss of a sense of self, a feeling that women had once been powerful, but no longer were.

Chapter 3, "What is a Historian?," begins the story of professionalization, and of the erasure of women as both subjects and authors of "scientific" history. Budding male professional historians bonded in elite schools, focussing on the word as distinguished "from the inferior feminine body." What they valued was

competition with their own sex, pursued through cloistered archival study and the seminar. Our second shock is the story of renowned Fren ch historian Jules Michelet and his second wife Athenaïs Mialaret. For twenty-six years, Athenaïs

> did research and reported on it, wrote sections of Jules's books, discussed projects and recorded details of their daily conversations on topics for books, and offered her judgments on the work that was published under his name.

After Michelet's death, Athenaïs was not only systematically written out of his intellectual life by his scholarly heirs and successors, but accused of having falsified and polluted it.

> [In] historiography itself the great historian, coupled with his absent, inferior, unoriginal partner, remains the ever-present touchstone for misogynistic, scientific standards.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the "manly" work of archival research and the seminar. Brotherhoods of scientific historians were gradually established in the universities of the late nineteenth century in both Europe and North America, and seminar gatherings spawned historical clubs and associations. Women were largely excluded from both seminars and archives, their amateurism denigrated as the "low," while "the extreme narrowing of subject-matter focus under professionalization and the 'scientific' methodology of men in universities" became the "high." "Facts" were paramount, and the historian's body and personality disappeared. As one male historian gloated, in scientific history "the author is completely absent. It is intellectual work, not human work." Fables and fantasies were expunged from historical writing in favour of "truth" about the politics of nation states.

> Using official documents to answer looming questions about the state, large-scale institutions, and their rulers, professionally written history replaced local lore and culture, family sagas of dynasties and noble lines, and narratives in which God's will manifested itself in the past.

The superficial interests of women and the immature histories of Asia and Africa were by definition outside of—and below—this higher professional work.

Chapter 6, "High Amateurism and the Panoramic Past," documents pockets of resistance. Women and non-professionally-oriented men continued to explore other historical pasts and even offered critiques of "scientific" history. One nineteenth-century woman notably scorned histories that stemmed from "the scalpel and the microscope" and historical writing that was "a mere onslaught of archivists and documentary criticism..." Histories, she argued, should be like Impressionist paintings. Activists worked to promote local archives and museums, countering the growing professional emphasis on national archives and narratives. Travel writing continued to explore the history of culture, and feminists began to write histories of women's work and women's suffrage. Smith sees amateurism as

> the intellectual avant-garde of a general historical project to reach the past. It marked out the psychic hotpoints where memory work was most active, and did this in so transgressive a way, crossing borders and disciplinary divides, as to provide safe passage for those professionals who started to venture a bit further themselves.

Among those were, eventually, some women. Chapter 7, "Women Professionals: A Third Sex?," explores doors opening for as well as closing to women historians.

> The woman professional worked like a man to train herself as a disembodied observer, a disciplined member of the scientific community, a transcendent purveyor of historical truth....

yet hostility towards women joining the club remained profound. Those who persevered were usually single yet still had difficulty obtaining university jobs. They endured bitter attacks on both their presence and their work and typically found scholarly companionship only with other women. But they helped to widen the boundaries of historical scholarship, gradually introducing such profane topics as the domestic, the sexual, and the cultural. For Smith, the "presence of... professional women historians... marked the eruption of historical 'modernity,' propelling the profession to its recent and no less gendered incarnations."

"Modernism, Relativism, and Everyday Life" are the subjects of Smith's final chapter. The idea of the grand narrative weakened at the end of the nineteenth century. "And, in history, the response was a modernism that incorporated the low, the everyday, the feminine, the aesthetic, the statistical, and much much more." But masculinist imagery continued to characterize the heroic historian, whose boundless energy now enabled him to reach further and accomplish more than his narrower predecessors. There would be "new heights" of synthesis, the discovery of collective mentalities, economic and social history, historiography, and multiple narratives. Yet male historians would continue to denigrate "female story-telling" and contrast the work of women to their own superior writing. With few exceptions, gendered power remained intact.

I have quoted Smith so frequently not only to give the flavour of her prose, but also to provide examples of sentences so packed that they are sometimes hard to follow. Like that of another historian she describes, Smith's writing occasionally "push[es] at the edges of intelligibility," at least for this reader. I was also sorry to find mistakes in her references to Canadian work: a date connected with Sylvia Thrupp's career in British Columbia, as well as my own name (in an endnote) are given incorrectly; the statement about Thrupp is undocumented. These are tiny flaws in an otherwise rich and almost always absorbing canvas.

The Gender of History, says one commentator, "should be required reading for every student of history." I can only repeat that, for once at least, this is not book jacket hyperbole, but exactly right.

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