

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Review Essay

Equal Citizenship of the Mind: Recent Studies in the History of Women's Education

Judy G. Batson.
Her Oxford.

Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008. viii, 380 pp.

Andrea G. Radke-Moss.

Bright Epoch: Women and Coeducation in the American West.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xi, 352 pp.

Jane Robinson.

*Bluestockings: The Remarkable Story of the
First Women to Fight for an Education.*

London: Penguin Books, 2009. ix, 261 pp.

Katharina Rowold.

*The Educated Woman: Minds, Bodies, and Women's Higher
Education in Britain, Germany, and Spain, 1865–1914.*

New York: Routledge, 2010. viii, 311 pp.

Sara Z. Burke

Laurentian University

When Vera Brittain wrote a history of women at Oxford in 1960, she defended her work on the grounds that the story represented “the contest for the equal citizenship of the mind,” and that the women involved in that contest deserved recognition (Batson, xvi). Fifty years later, it may come as a surprise to find scholars returning to the story of women's fight for university education, and in the case of three of the

four authors under review, openly claiming their admiration for the struggles of those early pioneers. While the books by Andrea G. Radke-Moss and Katharina Rowold are representative of a more general historiographical shift toward the integration of gender, class, and race into the history of women's education, the studies by Judy G. Batson and Jane Robinson recall an earlier stage of scholarship where historians were concerned to include the history because of its intrinsic value, and, like Vera Brittain, were unapologetically convinced that this story of hard-won progress simply deserved to be told. The four books fall into these two main categories of approach, yet they all share a common goal: to capture the meaning of this contest for the women involved, and to assess its significance through their ideas, memories, or lived experience.

In her overview of the historiography of women's education, published in the 2008 collection *Rethinking the History of American Education*, Margaret A. Nash argues that the field has followed the same pattern as women's history, moving from its original focus on the inclusion of women into historical narratives, to a sociocultural approach that incorporates discussion of class, race, and gender identity. In American historiography, this early stage of inclusion is well represented by Barbara Miller Solomon's 1985 study, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America*, which describes women's fight for access to universities, and their campaigns for equal provision within those institutions. In Britain, important studies documenting the fight for access and resources include Joyce Senders Pedersen, *The Reform of Girls' Secondary and Higher Education in Victorian England: A Study of Elites and Educational Change* (1987), and Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities, 1870–1939* (1995). By the 1990s, however, significant challenges to women's history from postmodern and gender theorists had prompted historians of women's education to shift their categories of analysis to accommodate differences of race, class, and ethnicity, and to analyze both femininity and masculinity as a social construct. Carol Dyhouse's more recent 2006 study, *Students: A Gendered History*, for example, focuses on the gendered experience of undergraduates in twentieth-century Britain, and explores how coeducation shaped the construction of both male and female student identities. In the United States, these challenges have produced books such as Lynn D. Gordon's *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (1990), and Christine A. Ogren's *The American State Normal School: "An Instrument of Great Good"* (2005), which move beyond the study of elite women's colleges, and examine the intersections of class and gender on both coeducational and single-sex campuses. As Margaret Nash points out, the history of female education has burgeoned over the last thirty years, and a unifying characteristic has been a significant shift from documenting inclusion to exploring the experience of the women themselves. "If early work largely was tied to the issue of access," Margaret Nash writes, "later work has been about what that education *meant* to those who did or did not gain access to it" (Nash, 150).

Jane Robinson's *Bluestockings: The Remarkable Story of the First Women to Fight for an Education*, describes the history of women's access to higher education in Britain and the experience of the first generations of educated women from the 1870s to the 1930s. While the book shares the theme of inclusion that characterizes earlier work

in the field, the heart of *Bluestockings* is formed by what Margaret Nash identifies as the attempt to understand the significance of education from the perspective of the female students themselves. Robinson's subtitle is somewhat misleading because her study uses oral histories—not of the first female undergraduates—but rather of women who attended British universities during the 1920s and 1930s. Wishing to capture the experience of university education through the voices of the pioneers, Robinson interviewed 120 women who provided her with vivid memories of their undergraduate lives. Robinson's goal in *Bluestockings* is to pay tribute to the “ordinary, extraordinary women” who cleared the path for the hundreds of thousands who have since followed, and by doing so convey their shared qualities: “enthusiasm, adventure, self-discovery, and the importance of cherishing whatever is most precious” (xxii-xxiii). A graduate of Somerville College, Oxford, Robinson is frank in her conviction that university education provides women with a positive and transformative experience, and *Bluestockings* is a tribute to countless women who experienced the intellectual freedom and self-confidence that came from university education.

While *Bluestockings* seeks commonalities among generations of women students in British universities, Judy Batson's *Her Oxford* explores the expansion of intellectual opportunity in a case study of one central institution, Oxford University. Carefully documenting the history of female students and faculty at Oxford, beginning with the founding of Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville Hall in 1879, Batson presents a story of “unobtrusive infiltration”; in 1920 women were awarded the right to take degrees, and by 1960, the women's colleges had gained the same rights and obligations as the men's colleges. In Batson's view, this history is a chronicle of women's struggle for equality (xv-xvi). Like Robinson, Batson finds this story inspirational, and *Her Oxford* is a history of quiet rebels; women who challenged social and intellectual restrictions first by gaining a university education, and then by living active and useful lives. “The first students at Oxford,” Batson argues, “broke free from this societal straitjacket. They showed courage in the face of much opposition in claiming the right to intellectual freedom and in refusing to accept the limited and sheltered lives of women of their day” (57).

In *Bright Epoch*, Andrea G. Radke-Moss employs gender analysis to consider how women students were able to contest and change their experience of higher education. While Batson assesses the mixed benefits of Oxford's coordinate structure—where female students belonged to residential women's colleges but attended lectures with male students—*Bright Epoch* focuses on the very different coeducational model popular in the new public land-grant universities of the American West from 1870 to 1918. In historiographical terms, Radke-Moss's book represents the shift away from stories of inclusion, and reveals a more complex analysis of how class, gender, and ethnicity interacted within the context of the new state-funded colleges. Like both Batson and Robinson, however, Radke-Moss openly admires the accomplishments of early university women, arguing that female students took a proactive role in challenging traditional gender restrictions and effecting reform both on their campuses and on a national level. *Bright Epoch* makes it clear that acceptance into coeducational universities was inherently progressive for women. “Rather than being

venues for female exclusion,” Radke-Moss argues, “western land-grant colleges offered opportunities for women students to determine new areas of participation and inclusion for themselves within traditionally male environments” (1).

Examining four universities, Iowa Agricultural College, Oregon Agricultural College, the University of Nebraska, and the Utah Agricultural College, *Bright Epoch* skilfully employs the concept of contested gendered spaces to highlight how women students challenged separation in ideological, political, and intellectual spaces, including in their academic work, debating societies, social interaction, athletic activities, and feminist reforms. The land-grant colleges were tax-supported, coeducational institutions, and their supporters promoted them as a progressive and democratic experiment; ideal communities where men and women together could study, socialize, and ultimately select their marriage partners from among their classmates. As her title suggests, Radke-Moss interprets the period up until the early 1900s as a time of opportunity for women students; a bright epoch for gender inclusion when new coeducational institutions were still flexible enough to allow for more liberal gender experimentations. After 1900, however, Radke-Moss notes a significant drop in enthusiasm for coeducation, linked to a variety of factors, including fears of declining birth rates among middle-class women, concern that universities were becoming feminized, and quotas on women’s admission. In spite of this decline after 1900, Radke-Moss concludes that the men and women at the land-grant colleges experienced overwhelming benefits from mixed-gender political, social, and intellectual interactions. “The advancements of women’s higher education achieved in later years could not have been possible without successes of early coeducational experimenting” (301).

In contrast to the studies by Robinson, Batson, and Radke-Moss, Katharina Rowold shifts our attention away from the material conditions of women’s experience, and explores instead the ideological underpinning of the movement for higher education, positioning her work within the parameters of intellectual history. Comparing the subtle differences in the debates in Britain, Germany, and Spain between the 1860s and 1914, *The Educated Woman* focuses on the complex and often contradictory ideas about the female mind and body which shaped the entrance of women into European universities. For Rowold, as for previous scholars of the late-nineteenth century women’s movement, the fundamental development of the period is the rapid acceptance of evolutionary theory, and the growing authority of the scientific and medical communities to pronounce on social questions. The strength of Rowold’s scholarship, however, lies in her rejection of any simple explanation of these ideas which might position advocates of women’s advancement on one side of the debate, with hostile doctors and scientists arrayed against them in preservation of the status quo. As *The Educated Woman* argues, eugenic ideas became increasingly influential in feminist arguments, and the evolutionary language employed within and beyond the scientific communities conveyed meanings which shifted and changed over the period.

By adopting a comparative approach *The Educated Woman* uncovers similarities as well as national differences among the movements for women’s higher education in Britain, Germany, and Spain. In each context, the debates were premised on the

assumption that women's education had to accommodate the natural differences between the sexes; yet in Germany, these discussions were shaped by the central idea of self-formation through education, or *Bildung*, and women's special cultural mission, while in Spain, Roman Catholic ideas about womanhood and the role of women in modernization determined the parameters of the movement. In all three countries, Rowold demonstrates, feminists both contested and embraced medical and scientific discourse on women's nature. For example, feminists in Britain and Germany in particular seized on the potential of Lamarckism evolutionary theory, which suggested that acquired characteristics such as an increase in intellectual capacity could be passed on from mother to daughter, thus greatly strengthening the argument that the higher education of women would lead to an overall improvement in the mental powers of future generations, and, the eugenicists argued, ensure racial progress and imperial strength. The fact that some evolutionists accepted the possibility of adaptation through environmental change freed women from the anchor of biological determinism. Rowold states, "although gender difference was biological, it was also mutable" (27). *The Educated Woman* reveals that feminists in Britain, Germany, and Spain all confronted the problems of modernity—the decline of imperial power, the moral and physical degeneration of the race, and the impact of the New Woman on the family—but adeptly negotiated evolutionary discourse to argue that the higher education of women would, in fact, cure rather than contribute to these troubles plaguing fin-de-siècle culture.

In all four books, a central theme emerges: the tension between the belief in an equal education that made no distinction between the standards for men and those for women, and the argument that women could be best served by access to different forms of higher education that took their separate needs into consideration. In Britain, this tension is illustrated nicely in the schism between the organizers of Girton College (1869) and Newnham College (1871) at Cambridge. As both Robinson and Batson demonstrate, the founder of Girton, Emily Davies, insisted that students follow the traditional course of male Cambridge undergraduates and take the preliminary "Little-Go" examinations, which included Latin, Greek, and divinity. In contrast, Henry Sidgwick and Anne Jemima Clough at Newnham argued that the "Little-Go" offered women no intellectual advantages and only delayed them from starting work for the Tripos (honours degree) course. Neither of the women's colleges was formally affiliated with Cambridge University—and women were not permitted degrees from Cambridge until 1948—but for Emily Davies the "Little-Go" became a fundamental symbol of the need to maintain stringent equality in the fight for university access.

The struggles at Oxford and Cambridge are reflected in the broader debates analyzed by Rowold and Radke-Moss. In *The Educated Woman*, Rowold reveals the deep divisions among European feminists over the ultimate purpose of women's higher education: to improve the race by passing along their intellectual capacity to their daughters, or to improve society by expanding their cultural and social role into the public sphere? Similarly, in *Bright Epoch*, Radke-Moss looks at how the coeducational land-grant colleges in the American West embodied a fundamental tension between

the goal of preparing women for their separate sphere of domesticity—manifest both in domestic science course work and in the performance of chores within the college building—and the perceived need to train female graduates to earn their own living by teaching domestic science, and in such careers as bookkeeping, stenography, or hostelry management. Women's domestic economy course work reinforced traditional gender separation, yet at the same time offered a growing number of female students the opportunity to take science courses in chemistry, botany, or physics, and, most importantly, work after graduation in a variety of non-traditional fields.

Collectively, these four books are an indication of the growth of women's education history in Britain and the United States, and of the continued fascination of historians in the thoughts and actions of those women who first claimed the right to intellectual equality. In Canada, the history of female education is still a largely underdeveloped field. In her 2002 inaugural address to the Canadian History of Education Conference in Quebec, later published in *Historical Studies in Education*, Nadia Fahmy-Eid pointed out that women's education was a new area in the historiographical landscape, and that it lacked recognition either as a branch of women's history, to which it is closely linked, or as a significant field of mainstream social history. This lack of recognition stands in contrast to the wealth of scholarship on women's education that characterizes both British and American historiography. For Canadian historians, the books by Robinson, Radke-Moss, Rowold, and Batson raise significant questions that have yet to be fully explored in either a provincial or national context. By examining issues such as the complex impact of evolutionary theory on women's admittance into higher education, the tensions between single-sex and co-educational models, and the debates over the ultimate purpose of women's education, we can develop a better understanding of the contest for an equal citizenship of the mind, and the meaning that contest had for the women involved.