

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

John G. Reid  
*Viola Florence Barnes, 1885–1979:*  
*A Historian's Biography.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. 228 pp.

**Kate Rousmaniere**

This engaging book, aptly subtitled “a historian’s biography,” is not only the biography of a woman historian and academic, but also the study of the emerging history profession through the experiences of one of its most notable pioneers. Reid studies the life of Viola Barnes, one of the first women to break into the academic field of history, in the context of the social history of higher education in twentieth century. In many ways then, this biography complements other historical studies of women in higher education by scholars such as Patricia Palmieri and Alison Prentice as well as memoirs of academic life such as those by Jill Kerr Conway.

Viola Barnes was an intriguing, dynamic, and difficult character. Born and raised in Nebraska, Barnes worked her way to doctoral studies at Yale University, under the tutelage of the scion of what became known as the “imperial school” of early American history: the argument that the history of the North American colonies should be seen in the broader, trans-Atlantic context of British imperial policy, and not as a unique, separate, and often mythologized history of Puritans and nascent revolutionaries. Barnes’ publication of her dissertation research in 1923 made waves in the historical profession, and her employment at Mt. Holyoke College all but assured her a stable and respectable career. As a professor, Barnes was prescient in her advocacy of the interdisciplinary field of American culture, and in her dialogic teaching techniques and use of primary sources to connect students directly with subjects. She was a survivor in many ways: a cancer survivor, a tireless advocate for women academics in a male-dominated field, and a passionate trumpeter of her school of thought against revisionist historical interpretations. An early leader of the Berkshire conference for women historians, and one of the first women leaders in the American Historical Association, Barnes was a prominent figure in American historical circles through the twentieth century.

But as Reid carefully argues, both the challenges facing women academics and Barnes' notably difficult personality undercut many of her achievements. More than most of her women peers, Barnes was an outsider. Her Nebraska roots excluded her from much of the class-based dynamics of the Seven Sisters and Ivy League colleges, and her own field of American history was marginalized in higher education through the mid-century (for years, she was the only Americanist amongst five European historians in her department). Although she taught at a women's college, by 1939 when Barnes became department chair, women were losing ground to men in higher education, and she lost her battles to hire more women faculty at Mt. Holyoke.

Furthermore, Barnes' career was marked from the beginning by her own sense of suspicion that she was not being credited for her work, both by her advisor and other male scholars who appropriated her research, and by the historical profession at large. Barnes' early struggles in the profession led her to quickly see her chosen field as a hostile and treacherous world, and her already strong character developed combative elements that led to full-blown paranoia in her later years. Further complicating her legacy is that she lived out the contradictions of the conservative wing of mid-century liberal feminism: she shared her domestic and personal life with a woman, and practiced an early form of affirmative action for women scholars, but was sharply critical of radical feminism and identity politics. A leader and mentor to many, her prickly personality kept her from successful leadership positions in higher education. Once a pioneer of new historiography of the colonial period, in later life she became resistant to new ideas. And although an advocate for women historians, she had conflict-ridden relationships with many of her women peers. Reid is careful to put Barnes' peculiarities in context, suggesting that her way of viewing the world, including her professional paranoia, had roots in her own experience, material concerns and actual conflicts.

For all her difficult nature, Barnes is a compelling character, in part because much of her life as a professor is familiar to us in higher education today. She was passionate about research to the extent of being obsessive about finding time to write. She was creative and supportive in teaching students, but selfish to departmental colleagues and family. She was committed to broader professional service and to the classroom, but she was ultimately valued, and valued herself, by her publications. She had a powerful ego, and was persistently insecure. She desperately sought grants to pay for her research leaves, working twelve-hour days in the spare British Archives of the interwar years. The trajectory of her career is also familiar: the promise and potential of graduate school, the struggles over promoting and earning credit for her work, the dynamics of university and departmental politics, and the growing realization with age that newer scholars would take the center stage.

The last chapter of the book bogs down a bit in historiographical debates, the subtleties of which are not always comprehensible to the average reader who is not an expert in early American history. But the discussion is significant, if only because these were the very debates that the aging Barnes herself refused to engage in, thereby leaving her outdated and stultified in her writing at the end of her life, resentfully rejecting editorial advice that left her magnum opus unpublished.

I enjoyed this book immensely. The writing is elegant and clear, and Reid complements the biographical story line with discussions about the emerging history profession and academic life. Barnes lived in a fellowship of notable men and women scholars who, even when she frustrated them with her demanding character, still admired and supported her. Reid takes the same attitude, and asks that his readers do as well. I finished this book with an appreciation for this dynamic woman pioneer, and a deeper understanding of the personal and professional challenges that undercut women academics and that can explain some of the eccentricities of academic life that still characterize much of higher education.