

James C Albisetti, Joyce Goodman,  
and Rebecca Rogers, eds.  
*Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World:  
From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

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**Roderick MacLeod**

Independent Scholar

We are told in the introduction to this collection that since Phyllis Stock's groundbreaking 1978 overview *Better than Rubies: A History of Women's Education* no one has attempted a comprehensive treatment of the subject. Instead, scholars have produced smaller studies of limited topics, rarely outside a national context. One might expect, therefore, that a 2010 work entitled *Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World* would take up the challenge of getting beyond national studies and marrying the ambitious global perspective of a work like Stock's with the latest scholarship. Curiously, however, James Albisetti, Joyce Goodman, and Rebecca Rogers have opted to go the old fashioned route of organizing the topic by country. The result is a volume that works as an overall resource but is less successful as a coherent history.

Coherence is not easy in a work of this scope, of course. To undertake the history of girls' secondary education over three centuries would be daunting for one author, so engaging a team makes sense. Inevitably, however, experts are rooted in the histories of specific countries; despite our desire to cross boundaries in our research, we continue to work overwhelmingly in national silos. (In Canada it is provincial silos.) This is especially true of the history of education, where developments are closely linked to legislation; one of this book's strong points is outlining such legislative change, and the discourse around it, in each country. Legislation and discourse are in turn shaped by the social and cultural features particular to each society, especially religion. How Catholicism affected the teaching of older girls in Spain or Italy was very different from the way it did so in a place like Germany, where the more dominant culture was Protestant. Equally, the tensions between liberalism and

traditionalism played out differently depending on a society's religious composition; the debate over an issue like co-education was different in France, where Catholicism was forever poised to oppose what it saw as excessive secularization, than in Sweden, where Lutheran notions of entrenched separate spheres predominated.

The problem with the national-history approach, and so many authors, is that readers can only make such comparisons by referring back and forth between chapters, often with help from the index. There is no overarching voice to draw real conclusions. The editors strove to counter this problem by asking each of the national experts to address specific common issues—coeducation, teacher training, the importance of feminism—and to cover a similar period. This they do inconsistently—although to be fair, historians do not readily write history-by-numbers and do not naturally treat periods other than their own with equal reverence. Some of the guidelines were logical, if problematic. For instance, confining the discussion to the education of middle- and upper-class girls makes sense given classic assumptions that secondary schooling led to university, but some authors do include token references to the working class, resulting in clutter rather than nuance. Other guidelines were, I think, ill-advised, such as the idea of including colonial experiences; many authors ignore this aspect (often with good reason) while others struggle to capture huge histories (India, Australia) in a few sentences without explaining how these developments were relevant to the situation at home.

Perpetuating the national-history focus on legislation also takes its toll on women's agency. Although the theme is generally well-handled, many authors seem to lose their nerve when it comes to treating periods of revolutionary change and resort to presenting girls' desire for education as a constant in the face of repressive laws. Nazi and Italian Fascist educational policies are covered in the chapters by Juliane Jacobi and Simonetta Soldani, who present such movements as a form of antifeminist "backlash." True enough, but it would be good to know how teenage girls and their families negotiated this radical environment, beyond a mere demographic response to laws. Voices do not emerge from the statistics in Thomas Ewing's treatment of the Soviet Union. More disappointing was the complete absence of women's agency under the Second Republic in Consuelo Flecha's chapter on Spain; rarely was social (and sexual) equality so fiercely debated as during the Spanish Civil War, and rarely did the status of women figure so prominently in the reaction under Franco. For authors not to be twentieth-century specialists somehow doesn't suffice. The hostility towards educating girls in so many parts of the world today should warn us against taking women's agency for granted.

The distraction of a national narrative may also explain striking lacunae in the book. Jews are given very short shift; we do not learn how Jewish girls found accommodation in secondary schools, aside from a quick comment in Jacobi's chapter and Ewing's even more casual reference to girls attending public school in Czarist Russia, which is distracting by how much it leaves unanswered. Monitorial schools, which had a huge impact throughout the British Empire in the nineteenth century, appear only once, in the chapter on Bulgaria. The role Scots played in advancing public education is somewhat lost in the chapter by Goodman which strains to include

all of Britain, Ireland and the colonies—raising the question why such places don't receive separate chapters, unless it is because the British experience is better known in the English-speaking world. And why, in a book covering the Western World, is the United States brought in only as a source of influence on Europe?

Had the book taken a thematic rather than a national approach, such matters could have been addressed in a more thoughtful manner, taking examples where needed to support larger observations. There would have been no need for the editors to make hurried efforts to draw the material together in the introduction. Confusion over the differences between various notions of secondary education in Europe and America could have been avoided.

Cravings for transnational perspective aside, most of the individual narratives are well-presented and engaging, and serve the purpose of covering their respective national stories. Reading each story as a separate entity, one is much less aware of the inconsistencies and of the disappointment over not yet having a magisterial synthesis of girls' secondary education. As a reviewer, I was able to compensate for the repetition and appreciate the details of each story by assigning myself one chapter a day, to be taken first thing in the morning. I found myself looking forward to learning how the issue would play out in the next country treated (literally, if this is Tuesday it must be Belgium) and was often moved by these accounts of what is at heart a struggle for basic rights. And then I would drive my teenage daughter to school and reflect on what a very long row was hoed before her.