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Conference: Women Learn from Women

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CONFERENCE: WOMEN IN HISTORY

Sponsored by the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, 500 women attended a conference last month at Douglass College, Rutgers University. What follows is a fraction of a report written by one of the participants and available from her: Constance Ashton Myers, Dept. of History, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S. C. 29208.

... the session on Sex Roles and Practices (subtitled, "With Respect to Health and Medicine"). Carroll-Smith Rosenberg (University of Pennsylvania) shed light on nineteenth century cultural attitudes concerning female biological crises, puberty, pregnancy, lactation, and menopause, showing a basic assumption to have been the quintessential "mystery" of women, a being bound by a complicated network of organs. These organs controlled her absolutely and caused her, willy nilly, to be "peculiar" and to be incapacitated at certain times, reinforcing the male myth of the helpless female, but curiously confining the myth to the middle and upper class female. In the second paper, Linda Gordon (University of Massachusetts) tried to explain the strong opposition to contraceptive devices voiced by a wide gamut of women—suffragists, reformers, even free-love advocates—and concluded 1) such devices were seen as "blackmail by men" to extricate themselves from responsibilities of marriage, thus undermining the family, which women needed more than men at that time, and 2) they were seen as a means of depriving women of the only meaningful work society allowed them, to wit, motherhood. The third paper, read by Ann Wood (Princeton University), assessed the quack cures prevalent in the nineteenth century for "women's complaints." These were cauterization, following the principle that one drives out an infection by creating another, and the rest cure. In both instances, Professor Wood found women dehumanized. Cauterization was the actual and symbolic penetration of the female body by a white-hot rod, the rest cure, the domination of the sick woman by a male doctor's will for a protracted period. To correct these abuses, Wood showed, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell cried out in print, among other things, for an increase in the number of female medical students.

CONFERENCE: WOMEN LEARN FROM WOMEN

On February 10, nearly one thousand women met at Barnard College to participate in a regional conference sponsored by Barnard, Columbia Women's Liberation, Douglass College, NYU, Queens College, Sarah Lawrence, Hunter College, Richmond College, and SUNY/College at Old Westbury. Twelve workshops, each running morning and afternoon, allowed participants to attend two sessions, ranging from "After Consciousness Raising, What?" and "How Far Will Legal Solutions Take Us?" to "Androgyny: The Range of Human Sexual Expression" and "Women Over Thirty: Fears, Expectations and Reality."

Most heavily subscribed was "Women in Search of Autonomy." The morning session, filmed by ABC-TV for a documentary, broke into groups of about twenty. Each woman was given newsprint and crayons and asked to make a "life-space drawing," illustrating things important to her, including areas of conflict, and daily activity. Then, moving around the circle, each woman talked about her drawing—a personal tool through which she and other women could locate and discuss their search for autonomy. Morning and afternoon sessions raised many different questions: Does autonomy necessitate alienation? Must all qualities considered "feminine" be sacrificed to success? Are there any we would like to hold on to? What is the difference between dependence and interdependence? In the absence of a female bonding system, how can women be more supportive of one another? Are women more afraid of failure or of success?

At the wrap-up session, representatives from each workshop summarized the discussion or focused on significant questions. Betty Scott, for example, reporting on two sessions of "Who Will Take Care of the Children?" suggested that a prior question needs to be answered by feminists concerned with the future of child care and the family. "Are mothers," she queried, "willing to relinquish *control*—the key word that came up again and again through the day—over their children?"

In general the conference, functioning entirely without the usual papers and speakers, managed to indicate that women can and do want to learn from other women, and that regional conferences of this nature may be useful for students, faculty and members of the interested community.

Julie Denison and Lynne Kaduson

BOOKS FROM THE FEMINIST PRESS

I'm Like Me: Poems for people who want to grow up equal, by Siv Widerberg. Fresh, funny poems from Sweden, about growing up, female or male. For children and young teenagers (5-15) but liberated adults love them too. Seven illustrations by Claes Backstrom, translations by Verne Moberg. \$1.50.

The Yellow Wallpaper, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, with an afterword by Elaine R. Hedges. Available April 15. \$1.25.

Approaching Simone, by Megan Terry. Award-winning women's play on the life of Simone Weil by the author of *Viet Rock*, introduction by Phyllis Jane Wagner. \$1.50.

Daughter of Earth, by Agnes Smedley. Dirt hard, proletarian feminist classic (semi-autobiographical novel) by a native American woman who worked all her life for oppressed people everywhere. Available May 1. \$2.50.

Books are available from The Feminist Press, 10920 Battersea, Columbia, Md. 21044. Please include postage and handling: rates are \$.40 for the first two books, plus \$.10 for each additional two.

A NEW SERIES: Glass Mountain pamphlets. The first of these, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, has already reached 7,000 people. Now available from The Feminist Press. Send \$1.25 (plus \$.25 for postage and handling) to the above address.