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Berkshire Conference Report

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Anyone who has been confronted by a student, teacher, colleague or friend with the remark—hostile, ignorant, or both—that “women never did anything in history” should find enormous comfort and pride in the Third Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. The 157 papers that were presented in 70 sessions over three days to an audience of nearly 1500 demonstrated not only the scope of women’s participation throughout history, but also the vast amount of work that women historians have done in uncovering that participation. And if the sheer size were not impressive enough, the creativity and scholarship of the work, and the warmth and energy of the presentations was certainly exhilarating.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the sessions and papers dealt with American material by more than two to one, though every period and place was represented. Several topics were particularly in evidence: women’s education, health/sexuality, women’s relationships with other women and women’s working lives. Two sessions on women and grants provided some practical help in a time of restricted budgets. There was one session each on popular culture, historiography, archives and oral history.

The evening hours provided time for people to meet informally and for such groups as the planning committee of the National Women’s Studies Association to continue their work. There were discussions of affirmative action and the status of graduate students as well as a variety of entertainments. One of the outstanding events was the Anna Crusis Women’s Choir’s folk opera of songs that women have sung from the fifteenth to the twentieth century.

A recurring issue in women’s studies has been the question of activism vs. academics: one side worries about declining standards of scholarship, the other about the lack of relevance in purely academic efforts. It’s an argument that brings into question the very existence of a conference such as the Berkshire; it is an issue I have heard raised at each of the three annual events. The 1976 Berkshire Conference seemed to provide a compromise that was unique and encouraging. The papers revealed vigorous questioning and committed efforts to apply the material to daily lives and feminist goals.

One of the most exciting sessions included two papers on feminist writers: one on Olive Schreiner by Joyce Berkman and the other on Virginia Woolf by Berenice Carroll. The discussion on Carroll’s treatment of Woolf as a political person—and a model for us today—was heated but sisterly in its groping for answers. How seriously can one take “the personal is the political”? Woolf personified it, but was she an activist? Questions of cultural vs. social; personal vs. political; and alternative vs. mainline organizing came up again and again as alternate sides of the room—and the question—cheered. Yet there was no sense of hostility or animosity; the atmosphere was tense, but it was a tension of excitement as reconciliation in the search for forms that are both feminist and workable seemed near. Unfortunately, time ran out and the discussion ended abruptly.

But that was certainly not the end of the question. It came up in one form or another in nearly every session I attended and in informal conversation over meals and at the evening cocktail parties. A commentator at the session on “Ante-Bellum Health Reform” expressed fear that a “second wave” of feminist scholarship had begun since the pioneering days of the late sixties and that it had grown more “objective.” She was concerned that self-conscious feminist motives and the insights of the movement had been lost. I disagree. Instead, I felt a sense of excitement and pride in the search for our past and in the remarkable progress that has been made. More important, perhaps, was the sense of community, the willingness to share new research, ideas and analyses in an effort to increase our collective knowledge and understanding. Together, women historians are digging eagerly and self-consciously into their material to find their history and to find answers and guides for their own lives and struggles. Women’s history as a field is more vital than ever and the 1976 Berkshire Conference was an inspiring demonstration of that vitality.

Jane Williamson

NATIONAL FOUNDING CONVENTION (continued)

Obviously, many details remain to be worked out. San Jose women have already begun to plan evening entertainment and to consider scheduling for caucuses, regional meetings, affinity groups, as well as for exercise and meditation. Further information will appear in the Fall issue of the Women’s Studies Newsletter. Final reminders: Charter memberships are needed to support the Association’s beginnings. For programs, the fee is $50; for individuals, $25; for students and the unemployed, $10; make checks payable to the National Women’s Studies Association and send them to Sybil Weir, Women’s Studies, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA 95192. Second, volunteer to coordinate your state; get in touch with your regional representative (see list above), or, if you can’t reach her, with Sybil Weir at San Jose. Third, enter your regional lottery by calling or writing your regional representative as listed above.