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Phyllis Arlow

Merle Froschl

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Women in the High School Curriculum

A Review of High School U. S. History and English Literature Texts

BY PHYLLIS ARLOW & MERLE FROSCHL

THE FEMINIST PRESS
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BOX 334
OLD WESTBURY, NEW YORK 11568

THE CLEARINGHOUSE ON WOMEN'S STUDIES
In a thorough analysis of 12 popularly used textbooks, Janice Trecker summarizes the traditional treatment of women in these books:

Women receive a few paragraphs of extravagant praise as essential to America, their high position in our culture is stressed, and a few are even mentioned. For the other 99 percent of the book, women are ignored.¹

Concerned about the inclusion of women in the secondary school's social studies curriculum, we are interested in locating those aspects of women's lives that have been most neglected in standard history texts and in assessing the quality of such information that is included.

We began this study by examining 14 currently used textbooks (see bibliography) for the following: the listings of women in the index and table of contents; the amount of coverage given to prominent women; the inclusion of minority women; the choice and number of illustrations of women; and the suggested further readings on women. We looked for the presentation of a balanced picture of the continuing roles of women, and the acknowledgment of women's contributions in key areas of history.

OMISSION OF WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW

One fact became immediately apparent—that was the omission of women from the general framework of history. In indexes we found separate listings for "women," which usually amounted to no more than a sentence or two in the text. Women's lives are usually relegated to special, secondary categories of concern, such as "Social Life in Victorian England" or "Women's Rights Movement—see Suffrage." There are no separate headings for "men."

The typical U.S. history textbook devotes one out of its 500 to 800 pages to women, their lives and their contributions. Where women are included, they appear under separate headings, in special sections, even on different colored paper. They are made to appear supplemental—as postscripts to history rather than an integral part of it.

Choice of Women Included

To be sure, there are a few prominent women included in standard history texts. However, it is interesting to note which women are consistently included and which are consistently ignored. Included are usually Pocahontas, Anne Hutchinson, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Amelia Bloomer, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jane Addams, Dorothea Dix, Carry Nation, Sacajawea, Clara Barton, Frances Perkins, Eleanor Roosevelt and Harriet Tubman. Granted that history texts are necessarily selective, one wonders, nevertheless, about the basis for selection: Why Harriet Tubman and not Sojourner Truth? Who decides that Carry Nation is more important than Margaret Sanger? Why are such reformers as Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix more significant than Rose Schneiderman and Mother Jones? Where are Mary McCleod Bethune, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Blackwell and hundreds of others? Janice Trecker supplies an explanation for the selectivity of texts:

Although it is tempting to imagine some historical autocrat sternly decreeing who's in and who's out . . . the omission of many significant women is probably not a sign of intentional bias. The treatment of women simply reflects the attitudes and prejudices of society. Male activities in our society are considered the more important; therefore male activities are given primacy in the texts. There is a definite image of women in our society, and women in history who conform to this image are more apt to be included.²

Many women are omitted by virtue of the topics chosen for inclusion in textbooks. As though by design, those areas in which women have traditionally achieved recognition—the arts, theater and dance—are generally omitted.
Illustrations

Pictures, photographs and paintings are almost exclusively of male subjects. Few women appear in illustrations (1 in 17 is average), and where they do they are often subordinate to or "the wives of" important men. For example, the only mention of Eleanor Roosevelt in one text occurs beneath a picture captioned "President and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1935." When women are the central figures in illustrations, they are often treated humorously, supplying comic relief to the more serious story of man's achievements. In one book, a photograph demonstrates how "Two beautiful Gibson Girls could set a man's head spinning." Another photograph shows a well-dressed woman talking on the telephone in an immaculate, modern kitchen with the naive caption, "Electric kitchens liberated many women from the drudgery of housework." Both photographs appear in a section entitled "The United States Becomes an Industrial and Urban Nation."

Recently, the women's movement has begun to supply editors with new "humor" for illustrations. In one book, the movement appears as a photograph of a "Women's Lib" march in which women are shown carrying placards that protest against their role as "unpaid slave laborers." The editors felt the need to balance this point of view with Hugh Hefner's statement: "These chicks are our natural enemy. It is time to do battle with them." The book's intention to amuse is obvious; nowhere are the serious issues and concerns of the women's movement discussed.

Minority Women

The minority woman is almost completely absent from history textbooks. We found no mention of American Indian, Chicana, Puerto Rican or Asian women. It is as though they never existed. Significantly, the inclusion of black history in texts has not made room for the black female, except for the briefest mention of Harriet Tubman. One text's discussion of "Negro Suffrage" does not explain its extension to black males only, nor does the same text mention, in its special section dealing with "The Negro in America," black women at all. When texts include slavery in America, it is with little awareness of the rich cultural heritage of Africa that slavery destroyed, and no insight into the special problems and achievements of the black slave woman. There is no word of the struggles of such black women as Katherine Ferguson and Sarah Douglass to set up schools for black children. Such women as Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McCleod Bethune, Ida Wells Barnett, to name but a few, are rarely included. Missing also are portraits of contemporary black women as well as their special problems of employment in contemporary U.S. society.

Language

A more subtle manifestation of sex bias can be found in the language of history texts. Language is not merely a means of communication; it is also an expression of values and behavioral models. The overwhelming male bias of the language of social studies textbooks is evidenced by an exclusive use of male pronouns and generic terms, the inclusion of demeaning terms for women and the perpetuation of the image of women as fragile and timid.

Masculine forms (he, man) in our language are commonly used as though they referred to all people, male and female. In fact,
however, such terms used in texts operate to exclude females. When told that “men” headed West, or that “man-made” improvements have raised America’s standard of living, the reader does not form a mental image that includes females. Consider this passage on colonial America:

Men had to do things for themselves or with the aid of a few scattered neighbors. . . . In the end men and their institutions were adjusted to the demands of the American continent.7

The hypothetical person in texts is always male: the “man” of tomorrow, for example, or “These are the times that try men’s souls.” Females are typically referred to as the wives or mothers of males. Women are also seen as appendages, as in “The pioneer took his family West.” Elizabeth Burr, Susan Dunn and Norma Farquhar conclude:

Authors tend to blur man with people in general. . . . At the same time, they are not willing to blur women with people in general. One never sees a picture of women captioned simply “farmers” or “pioneers.” Linguistic failure to permit women to be “people” mirrors a long tradition of male supremacy and a socially induced need to keep women in a separate and unequal category.8

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF WOMEN’S CONTRIBUTIONS

To assess how textbooks portray women’s contributions to history, we looked at four key areas—the colonial period, the rights and reform movements, women and work and contemporary America—all areas in which an abundance of information is available to historians.

The Colonial Period

The colonial period of history is one in which a great deal of primary and secondary source material exists—as in the cases of Indian tribes that were both matrilineal and matrilocal, the trial transcript of Anne Hutchinson, various first-hand references to Elizabeth Poole, or the poetry of Anne Bradstreet. Colonial women participated in a variety of activities including medicine, farming, business and arms-bearing. Yet there is little information in most texts concerning the woman in early America. In textbooks we find that America of the colonies was a ‘‘man’s’’ world. Typical of the masculine image is this passage from a popular text:

The farmer’s lot was not an easy one. He and his sons had to get up at daybreak—and even earlier in the winter—to milk the cows, bring in the firewood for the stoves, feed the hens and pigs, and fill the water for the livestock.9

In another text, the only specific reference to women in this period noted that “women rode in the wagons, while men and boys walked beside them.”10

Notable women of the period are not discussed in terms of their contributions to American history, but are given minimal coverage in parenthetical asides. This point is illustrated by the following excerpts from several texts:

Then around 1612, John Rolfe (who later married the Indian Pocahontas) learned how to grow and cure tobacco.11

Lewis and Clark benefited by having with them a young Shoshone, Sacajawea, wife of the interpreter Dorion.12

Other exiles from Massachusetts, among them Mrs. Anne Hutchinson, soon started other settlements along the shores of Narragansett Bay.13

The only woman of the colonial period mentioned in one history book is Abigail Adams. There she is not noted for her writings and letters on reform, but as “Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams and mother of John Quincy Adams.”14

Nowhere is there a picture of the lives of women during this period in history. No book points out that women made a considerable contribution to colonial life as community builders and apprentices in trades and professions. Often they worked side by side with men in a society that needed all the available skilled hands. Probably women were never so “free” again in the New World. Their story should be told.

Rights and Reforms

Much more information about women appears in sections on women’s rights and in general sections on the reform movement of the late nineteenth century. Yet even here a full page on suffrage is a rarity, and the treatment is generally superficial. Consider the following excerpts, the only coverage given in those texts to women’s rights:

Hence in 1848 Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton called a women’s convention, which met in Seneca Falls, New York. The delegates resolved that all men and women were created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights.15

Agitation for women’s rights culminated in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and a Declaration of Sentiments couched in the phraseology of the Declaration of Independence.16

Dorothea Dix, a resolute Quaker and a teacher, undertook prison reform and in particular a more humane treatment of the insane. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Margaret Fuller began an agitation that women, though they were daughters or wives, should have property rights or even the right to vote.17
In one book, no reference is made to the Seneca Falls Convention, yet three paragraphs are used to describe the Bloomer costumes.

Interpretive and summarizing statements about women as reformers or about reform movements tend to be simplistic, uninformed, or overtly male-biased, as in the following examples:

Reformers believed that women had as much to contribute to reform as men.18

The organized feminist movement arose earlier in the United States than in any other nation not because American women enjoyed so few privileges but because they had so many that they demanded more.19

The essential demands of the abolitionists, the feminists, the educational reforms and the labor unions were all eventually fulfilled.20

After the vote, American women now assumed an unquestioned role in shaping the production of goods—material, humanistic, literary and artistic. They were the chief spenders of money.21

Nowhere do the textbooks give a balanced picture of the continuing roles of women during the era of rights and reforms. We find undue emphasis on the lengths of women’s skirts rather than information on their struggle for civil rights; the characteristics of the Gibson Girl rather than the activities of feminists; the fashions of the flapper rather than the social changes between the wars.

Women and Work

Textbooks almost totally neglect the whole question of women’s work and women’s role in the early labor movement. Instead, the story of labor is limited to the introduction of women workers into the textile mills in the 1820’s. In some cases, authors clearly show their prejudices against women’s participation in the labor force, as in the following:

The ranks of labor were so constantly diluted by immigrants and women that the artisans were alarmed over their declining status.23

Unionization was pursued so rapidly and widely as to include even seamstresses and cloak makers.24

Few texts mention the fact that women and children were among the most overworked and underpaid workers in America, and none consider the effect of such labor on family and community life. Most texts, however, do mention the Lowell mills—usually with a brief and wholly complimentary description of the working conditions for young farm women.

In general, the sections on labor in textbooks follow a familiar pattern in regard to women: women workers are given little space, very few are mentioned by name and fewer still are quoted. Most books give women and work no more than three entries of a few lines each.

It is difficult to understand how women in labor can be dismissed with so few lines of text when, in 1890, at least one million women worked in factories. They outnumbered the men in clothing factories and made up about half the labor force in textile mills and tobacco factories. In addition, women organized strikes and supported male unions under the most extreme hardships and fought to end child labor abuses and the inhumane conditions of the nation’s factories.

Today, more than half of all women between the ages of 18 and 55 spend at least part of each year working for pay. Yet discussions of contemporary labor problems tend to neglect...
women, just as do historical accounts. Texts avoid discussion of those forces that have kept women in the lowest paid work. Nor is unpaid housework mentioned. One text summarizes the contemporary position of working women as follows:

As of the early 1950's one out of every four married women were in the labor market. This came largely as a result of conveniences in homemaking which gave women extra time.25

An accurate picture of the women who make up 40 percent of the American work force is given by Robert Smuts in *Women and Work in America*:

The picture of women's occupations outside the home has changed since 1890 in only a few essentials: a sharp decline in the relative importance of manual work on farm, in factory and in household service occupations; and sharp increases in the importance of clerical and sales work, teaching and nursing, and nonhousehold service jobs. There are still relatively few women in managerial positions and in the traditionally male professions.26

In all mention of work in history texts, only “man’s work” is considered worthy of description. But working women have a story to be told as well. Where are the farm women, who, throughout history rose before the sun and spent their days as active partners in the family’s common work? Or the thousands of frontier women who homesteaded and claimed property without the help of a male partner? Or the women who, during the Civil War, worked as cooks, laundresses, adventurers, spies, scouts and guides? (Of all of women’s activities during the Civil War, women’s entry into nursing is the only one regularly noted in history texts.) Or the women who took in boarders, sewing and washing to provide for the necessities of the household? Or the women whose volunteer efforts made possible hospital reforms and community organizations? Or the women writers, artists and dancers who have contributed to our cultural heritage?

**Contemporary America**

If in textbooks the treatment of women throughout history is inadequate, the examination of women’s contemporary lives is equally incomplete. Even texts that include sections on the terms of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson still give the impression that the passage of the nineteenth amendment solved all the problems of discrimination against women.

There is little or no information on the current legal challenges to discriminatory laws, nor any discussion of how the law affects women in general.

In addition, one of the greatest battles of the early twentieth century, the crusade for birth control, is glaringly omitted. Considering its continued impact on women and society, Janice Trecker asks:

How many students know that men and women were jailed for advocating birth control? That books were seized, that clinics were raided by the police? That desperate birth control leaders went on hunger strikes to plead their case?27

Our rapidly changing social conditions make such topics as sex-role socialization an important issue for social studies texts. Young people should understand the forces that shape the concepts of masculinity and femininity not only to understand themselves, but to understand the social and political structures of society.

**A LOOK TO THE FUTURE**

Based on the information in these commonly used texts, one might summarize the history and contribution of the American woman as Janice Trecker reasonably does:

Women arrived in 1619. They held the Seneca Falls Convention on Women’s Rights in 1848. During the rest of the nineteenth century, they participated in reform movements, chiefly temperance and were exploited in factories. In 1920 they were given the vote. They joined the armed forces for the first time during the Second World War and thereafter have enjoyed the good life in America.28

So little has been included that when one is asked what is missing, one is tempted to answer, “everything.” It is not only that students need to learn about the lives of more women “achievers,” but that they need to know about the lives of ordinary women as well: diaries, letters, journals and newspapers are a rich source of information about women who have either been excluded from historical accounts or who were recorded only in their stereotyped feminine roles. No one who has read personal accounts of the women of the Western frontier can believe the textbook picture of the idealized pioneer women. No one who has read narratives of the Triangle Fire of 1911 will be satisfied with a scanty reference to women workers. No one who has read the lives of Margaret Sanger, Alice Paul or Isadora Duncan will believe that the Flapper was the most important woman of that era.

Women and men students both have a right to learn about the achievements of women in history and about the process through which women have worked to change their status. Since texts are notably biased, students will have to rely, at least for the next decade or two, on supplementary materials to present a true picture of history.
FOOTNOTES

4 Richard C. Brown et al., The American Achievement, p. 520.
5 Brown, p. 518.
6 Richard Hofstadter et al., The United States, p. 841.
7 Avery O. Craven and Walter Johnson, American History, p. 223.
8 Elizabeth Burr et al., "Equal Treatment of the Sexes in Social Studies Textbooks: Guidelines for Authors and Editors," p. 70.
9 Todd and Curti, p. 47.
10 Ruth Wood Gavian and William A. Hamm, United States History, p. 188.
11 Todd and Curti, p. 21.
13 Todd and Curti, p. 32.
14 Gavian and Hamm, p. 186.
15 Alexander Desconde et al., United States History, p. 228.
17 Caughey and May, p. 200.
18 Irving Bartlett et al., A New History of the United States, p. 249.
21 Bragdon and McCutchen, p. 590.
23 Morison and Commager, p. 507.
24 Morison and Commager, p. 509.
25 Richard Hofstadter et al., The United States—History of a Republic, passim.
26 Robert W. Smuts, Women and Work in America, p. 35.

TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED


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