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Second Berkshire Conference on the History of Women

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SECOND BERKSHIRE CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF WOMEN

The Berkshire Conference of Women Historians decided in 1972 to lend support to research in the history of women. The field was regarded with some suspicion by many historians who did not see it as legitimate, and insisted that it was a "fad" whose time would soon pass. Moreover, too many people doing research in the field were working in isolation; rarely does one history department employ more than one person working in the history of women. Professors Lois Banner and Mary Hartman made the first proposal for a conference which would assert our belief that the history of women is a legitimate field which can make major contributions to the understanding of the past. They agreed to organize a meeting and seek sponsorship from Douglass College. They worked on a shoe-string budget, and prepared for a small conference of 75 or, hopefully, 100 interested workers who would have an opportunity to talk together, share ideas and resources, and build enthusiasm. Advance registrations suggested bigger crowds than anticipated, and by conference's end nearly 600 had registered and many more had attended without registration. Clearly, this conference was greatly appreciated by historians of women.

At the following spring meeting (May, 1973), basking in the Douglass success, the Berkshire Conference agreed that conferences on the history of women should be continued, and voted to undertake two more, one in fall 1974 and another in 1976. It was decided that we should employ a larger committee in order to spread the work load, which had been extraordinarily heavy for Banner and Hartman; that we would need financial support; and that we should again find sponsorship from an institution with special concern for women's education. Sponsorship was quickly settled. Several institutions offered, among them Radcliffe whose new Dean of Admissions, Alberta Arthurs, had attended the first conference at Douglass and wanted a second conference at Radcliffe.

The program committee* began to meet in the fall of 1973 in order to decide on the emphasis desired for the program. We advertised for proposals in newsletters, and we received hundreds of them. The completed program had 52 sessions—enough, we thought, to allow small groups to get together in the sessions and talk about their work. The emphasis was firmly placed on what we might call a "new" history, getting away from traditional political or biographical approaches. Instead, we wanted to display a variety of new and creative methods for dealing with a challenging historical problem—rediscovering the lives of a long-neglected and often silent majority. Attendance speaks for the continued need for such conferences and the attractiveness of the program. We thought we would have about 1,000 people; final registration was exactly 2,000; and still more people attended sessions without registering at all. This is roughly equivalent to the size of the annual conventions of the Organization of American Historians. We also attracted people from every generation: several high school groups registered, many undergraduate and graduate students, professional historians of all ages, and interested women from diverse groups. For example, we had a delegation from NOW, and a group of elderly retired nurses who were attracted by various sessions on women and medicine.

The committee met at the end of the conference to put together impressions, gossip, overheard remarks. It was our impression that the program was, over-all, good history and well-received. A number of major research trends were recognized: women and the family; women's role in industrialization; the historian's new concern with the private spheres such as sexuality, health; women

and the professions; women and social institutions, such as church, trade unions or schools. This program also highlighted the new methodological developments which are essential to women's history, such as demography, oral history, psychohistory. Many scholars reported finding greater interest in their research than they had expected and more historians engaged in active research than they knew existed. Therefore an important contribution of the conference was the opening of communication among scholars in new fields, which will help avoid duplication of research, foster cooperation, further exchanges of information, and offer opportunities to test hypotheses and interpretations.

The quality of sessions reported on ranged from "brilliant" to "dreadful," but the overwhelming majority of papers seem to have been good, solid work, and there were differing perceptions of success. One session was reported to have had a rather mediocre paper by a graduate student; but another committee member had been told by the student in question how much she had learned about how to shape her work, and how stimulating it had been to be involved in a session with mature scholars. Indeed, the mix of senior and junior historians learning from each other was a major asset of the conference. Senior historians could communicate their professional experience and set new work in a broad context; younger historians expressed their fresh enthusiasm for new methods and new topics.

What problems did arise; where might we like to improve in the future? First, the old problem of overly-long papers, which limit discussion and audience involvement. This problem is persistent in academic meetings, and the next program committee will have to grapple with it again. In fact, we might experiment much more with format, and encourage new ideas about presentation. Second, not all of the workshops were successful in sharing problems, ideas and information. The ones which worked best were linked to formal sessions, and/or ones for which the members had met to plan in advance. Third, although it was grand to have undergraduates on the program, it was, we now realize, patronizing to put them in a separate session. Since it is quite an innovation to include undergraduates in meetings of this kind at all, we won't apologize for not doing it in quite the right way the first time. Next time, however, we might advertise that we will consider undergraduate research, and if it is good put it in regular sessions. Fourth, the decentralization of the committee did produce some mix-ups, situations in which everyone thought someone else was taking responsibility. Slightly tighter organization might help avoid problems, but on the whole, the virtues of a democratic committee are more important than its faults. Fifth, we were a little cheese-paring in our budget. We should in particular have budgeted transportation funds for which graduate students and professors emeriti could apply. Sixth, it may have been a mistake to spread out through three days. Seventh, there has been comment about the role of men on the program, and particularly about some of the male commentators who attacked the legitimacy of the history of women and thereby challenged the premises of the conference. Men were welcomed on the program, but in future any historian (male or female) who is vehemently opposed to the validity of women's history ought not to be invited to *comment*. Comments, to be helpful, must work within some common assumptions of value, and not attack the entire enterprise. However, we might, at our next conference, arrange for a debate on some topic like "Is women's history a separate history?" In the long run, the role of men in the program may be less important than their absence in the audience, which was most disappointing.

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Sagaris, an independent institute for the study of feminist thought, will open in the summer of 1975, at Lyndon State College in Lyndonville, Vermont. Sagaris will function as a think tank and school where feminist political theories can be studied and re-examined, and where women with prior experience in feminism can explore the connections between feminist theory and individual skills and disciplines.

The program will be intensive. There will be two five-week sessions, each with space for 120 students. Tuition will be \$400. for a five-week session and room and board will be \$300. Some financial aid will be available. Daycare facilities will be available for the cost of the child's room and board. For those who wish to reduce costs, camping on the grounds will be available for \$10. a week. For more information and applications, write: Sagaris, Inc., 130 West 86 St., Apt. 8C, New York, N. Y. 10024.

The Clairol Loving Care Scholarship Program, 1975-76. The Clairol Company has decided to continue its scholarship program for older women who wish to return to school. A total of \$50,000 will be awarded in grants of \$1,000 to women age 30 or over who plan to attend two or four year colleges, vocational programs, or to do graduate work at the Master's level. The awards will be made through a central agency rather than through participating schools, in order to open the program to more women. For more information and applications, write: Clairol Loving Care Scholarship Program, c/o The Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2012 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington D.C. 20036. Deadline for fall semester applications is July 7, 1975.

The Revolt of Mother
and other stories

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman
The Feminist Press

In sum, we would say that the conference meant many things to many people. An observant Radcliffe undergraduate, a reporter for *The Crimson*, told me that she saw several interlocking groups: the historians, very professional; the feminists, very political; and the feminist historians. But we had more than that. We attracted many women who hoped that the past would help them understand the present and plan for the future; we had the jobless, who looked for an intellectual opening and maybe a job opening; we had an "old girls" group which enjoyed being the "movers and shakers," the senior historians at a meeting which recognized them as powerful perhaps for the first time; we had another group which was becoming socialized in the profession in a way that we hope was supportive and satisfying. All these, and many more, engaged in our enterprise. The effect was, we think, a declaration to the profession that the history of women is an important field for research and teaching, and that without it there can be no true understanding of the past.

* Louise Dalby, Skidmore College; Ellen Dubois, SUNY, Buffalo; Mary Maples Dunn, Bryn Mawr College; Linda Gordon, University of Massachusetts, Boston; Gwendolyn Evans Jensen, University of New Haven; Patricia King, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College; Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, Simmons College; Claudia Koonz, College of the Holy Cross; Catherine Prelinger, Yale University; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, University of Pennsylvania; Barbara Rosenkrantz, Harvard University; Lillian Shiman, Nichols College; Barbara Sicherman, Radcliffe Institute; Kathryn Kish Sclar, University of California, Los Angeles; Martha Tolpin, Radcliffe Institute; Martha Vicinus, Indiana University.