Fall 1979

Emma Willard: Feminist

Anne Firor Scott

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/326

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Emma Willard: Feminist
By Anne Firor Scott

Anne Firor Scott gave the Cum Laude Address at the Emma Willard School (originally the Troy Seminary) in May 1978. We have cut the lecture only slightly to fit our space and audience. It is, as she wrote to us, "an example of trying to persuade a group of students to look at the past of their own institution, and learn from it." "I gathered," Scott added, "that the students were expecting some kind of high-minded exhortation, and were pleasantly surprised."

The Oxford dictionary on historical principles defines feminism as the "advocacy of the claims and rights of women," and notes that the word first came into use in 1895. Thus Emma Willard, who died in 1870, never called herself a feminist. Yet when it came to the "advocacy of the claims and rights of women" she was second to no one in her generation, and, as much as any other person of her time, she contributed to the spread of such advocacy among women themselves. . . .

. . . Emma Willard managed to fulfill all the expectations for the behavior of "a true woman," while in her actual work she broke many contemporary taboos, as she taught several generations of young women to believe in and work for those "claims and rights of women" which constitute true feminism. She was a feminist who learned early in life not to terrify men.

The fact that you and I are here today, and that most of you will go to college, and many of you to graduate or professional schools, is due in part to the effectiveness with which Emma Willard spread her conviction that women's minds are in no way inferior to those of men and her conviction that women should take responsibility for their own lives, for the use of their own talents, and for shaping the rising generation.

Fortunately, here in Troy, there is no need to explain who Emma Willard was. You know about the appropriate symbolism of her birth in the year of the Constitutional Convention. You know that she grew up as the sixteenth of seventeen children on a Connecticut farm and went to a village school where she very soon knew more than the teachers—until by good fortune a young Yale graduate, saving money for medical training, came to teach there, recognized her ability, and challenged her to do her best. At age seventeen she took charge of the school, and by the time she was twenty she was head of a female academy in Middlebury. It infuriated her that she couldn't be admitted to the college which had recently opened there, but she turned her fury to good account, went to work, and, with a little help from some of the male students, learned the subjects the college was teaching. She got married, had a child, and spent a couple of years, as she rather inelegantly phrased it, as "a domestic drudge"; then—fortunately, as it turned out—her husband lost all his property, and to help him out she opened her own school. That was in 1814, and I suppose one might date the beginning of this school from that moment.

Now there were lots of women running schools for girls in 1814—but usually what they offered was a little sewing, a little French, perhaps a little music; and mostly they wanted to make a little money. Chances were they themselves didn't know much more than what they were teaching the girls, and the whole affair was, it is fair to say, lightweight.

Emma Willard had an entirely different idea of what a school for young women should be. She wanted her students to study mathematics, philosophy, geography, history, science, and the ancient and modern languages. In short, she wanted them to learn what men learned in college—and there was no college anywhere in the world at that time open to women.

Her ambition was unbounded. She drew up a plan to lay before the New York legislature, calling upon the state to pay for several high-grade female seminaries. She used the word "seminary," she said, in order not to arouse the jealousy of men, and she carefully denied that she wanted to found colleges for women. Yet she believed that women were just as likely to be geniuses as men were, and that women could learn any subject men could learn. She knew this was true from her own experience, and she wanted to prove it to the world. . . .

When the legislature, despite kind words, failed to provide any money, she was downcast, but she didn't waste time in recriminations. Instead, with some help from the city fathers of Troy, in 1821 she opened the Troy Female Seminary, which has been here from that day to this.
She planned the curriculum and trained the teachers (recruiting others to teach music and languages); told her friends that at last there was a school for their intellectually ambitious daughters; taught herself more science, philosophy, and higher mathematics, since she wanted to rely as little as possible on male teachers; and, before long, young women from all over New York and New England were coming here. In another decade they were coming also from the South and West, and occasionally from Europe.

During the fifty years after its founding, perhaps 13,000 pupils studied at the Troy Seminary. In proportion to population, that would be as if 72,000 women had studied at the school between 1928 and 1978. In other words, the number was large enough to make an impression on the rapidly growing American society and culture.

And that was exactly what Mrs. Willard intended. "It is to the future lives of my pupils, taken as a body, that we must look, as the test of our success," she said. And what did she want those future lives to be?

Like Emma Willard herself, her pupils were supposed to dress correctly, speak quietly, and make ritual obeisance to men. She once wrote to Catharine Beecher, for example, that she thought the only natural order of government in the world was found in the family, and the only natural governor was the father. She also watched over her pupils to make sure they didn't behave in any way that the community would judge to be wild.

But once they had done those things to satisfy social propriety, Mrs. Willard's students were to learn higher mathematics, science, and philosophy, and anything else they wanted to. They were to take intellectual life seriously and prepare for lifelong learning. They were to be prepared for self-support so that they need marry only when they wanted to, and not from necessity. She hoped a great many would follow her example and become schoolteachers for the express purpose of promoting the education of women in all parts of the growing republic. For these students she provided tuition on credit, to be paid back from their earnings as teachers.

If they did marry—and many did—Mrs. Willard wanted her students to become community leaders. In the 1840s she conceived the idea of Women's Associations for the Common Schools, which she organized herself in many Connecticut and New York towns and taught to take over responsibility for the public schools. She developed Troy alumnae into a network of women across the country with whom she kept in close touch.

She taught by example as well as by precept. Her own behavior, however ladylike, was uniformly that of an autonomous human being with enormous self-confidence. I have already described her initiative in founding this school; her authorized biographer, John Lord, who knew her well, said that by the time she was thirty-three, "her soul panted for a wider sphere and she longed for some institution she could direct." Thus, she created this institution and directed it with a vengeance, planning everything from the curriculum to the diet, and even planning who should room with whom for the best educational outcome.

At the end of the first decade she left the school in her sister Almira Lincoln's capable hands and went off to France, England, and Scotland to study the state of women's education there. In Paris she presided over her own salon, was introduced to the king and queen, prowled around investigating the condition of French education—and found it inferior—for women—to what was available here in the wilds of America. England and Scotland got lower marks, too, than America, and she came home reinforced in her conviction that the future of the republic depended upon women, and that she must prepare as many as possible to carry that responsibility.

The Journal of that trip is a particularly interesting expression of her ideas. In France she was delighted to find that women worked with their husbands in business, and commented that it would be a great improvement if Americans would countenance such participation, so that men would not avoid marriage for fear of not being able to support a wife. In England her chief attention was focused upon independent, achieving women, and she wrote scornfully of English men, whose treatment of women was "calculated to drive women who reflect upon it either to a course of deceit or to desperation." English men, she observed, fearful of women's knowing too much, "consider that the perfection of our nature is to amuse them and do menial services for their convenience...." At Oxford she could hardly enjoy the beauty of the colleges for thinking of the fact that they were not open to women and of the injustice of so much money being spent upon one sex alone. Scotland was a little better, for there, she said, women were permitted to feel like human beings.

By the time she got back to Troy she was becoming more and more outspoken on "the woman question." For example, in a public speech in 1833 she said, "Justice will yet be done. Woman will have rights. I see it in the course of events. . . ." She went on to point out that if men did not wake up and begin to accord women their rights, it would not be surprising if "some among us of impetuous spirit" were driven to radical action. "There are women," she said, "who feel for their sex as patriots feel for their country." She deplored the fact that women who spoke up for women's rights were accused of unsexing themselves, and added that "women of the finest minds muse in pensive silence on the injustice they cannot but feel, and often
...In the years between 1821 and 1871, when Emma Willard either was principal or was living on the school grounds and exerting a powerful influence upon Troy pupils, she was imbuing many young women with her own view of women's role, and with the need for attention to the "claims and rights of women." Yet parents trusted her because the school was so well run, because manners and morals were attended to. There is one lovely report of a legislative committee in 1852 recommending that some money be given to this school whose excellence was attested by the fact that no young lady had ever eloped from it!

I have been engaged for a while in trying to track down the women who went to Troy to find out what they did with their lives. The indications are that many of them did a great deal. Here I have time for only two illustrative examples of consequences of the Willard way of looking at the world.

One comes from the diary of a New England woman named Lucy Ruggles who left Troy in 1845 and went South to teach. She spent some time in a Charleston family (where she learned to hate slavery), and then she got a better job at a school in Virginia. To make the trip, she took a boat to Wilmington, North Carolina, then a stagecoach across that state. When the stage came to a swollen creek which it could not cross, the driver was much perturbed. The gentlemen, he said, could cross the creek on a floating log, but what about the lady? Lucy Ruggles recorded the incident in her diary. "'The lady can do almost anything she undertakes,' said I, 'so lead the way.'" The men were much impressed. Mrs. Willard would have been proud of her.

My second illustration comes from the letters of a graduate of 1856, Mary Newbury Adams, who went back to live in Dubuque, Iowa, and became in time a leading advocate of woman suffrage in that state. There is a book to be written about Mary Adams, who was, I suspect, as interesting a woman as Emma Willard herself. But I will just note here that in 1869, when her four children were all under ten, she founded the Iowa Institute for the Arts and Sciences, and set a generation of youngsters to studying geology and botany. She did many similar things while continuing to educate herself in a number of fields. What intrigues me most was that she was a serious student of women's history. In a letter to her sister in 1878 she wrote, "Our daughters must begin to know what women have done in the world. Historians have usually ignored them. It is well to buy a good square blank book and keep it as a Woman's Record Book. I did this years ago and was amazed at the number of noted women I needed to know about. . . ." There speaks a true daughter of Emma Willard, as well as a forerunner of the women's historians of our own day. . . .

I think Cum Laude speakers are traditionally expected to give advice, but I have chosen rather to tell a tale. The only advice I have is: remember, all the days of your life, that you are but a most recent link in that important cause which began at this school in 1814, the cause Emma Willard always called "the progress of my sex," and do your bit to further that progress.

Anne Firor Scott is Professor of History at Duke University.

Brief, A-mazing Movements:
Dealing with Despair in the Women's Studies Classroom
By Cheri Register

Women's studies majors at the University of Minnesota are required to take two quarters of a course called Women's Studies Seminar some time in their junior or senior year. While the theme of the seminar varies from quarter to quarter, its underlying purpose is constant: "to allow students to direct knowledge and methodology gained from courses and experience toward topics of an interdisciplinary nature with a focus on women." The variant that I taught in the fall of 1978 was called Feminist Learning: The University and Beyond. Its intent was to help students become conscious of the learning process and shift their focus from content to method, from what to how and why. It is a difficult transition to make, particularly in a university where passive lecture courses are the norm. The lack of tangible subject matter can be troubling, and it takes time to get used to the teacher's function, which is not to pass on information, but to guide, provoke, and challenge, often from the sidelines.

For their first lengthy assignment, I asked students to prepare an oral report on the impact of feminism on a particular discipline or area of inquiry. Many of our majors are double majors who seldom get an opportunity to tie together the two strands of their education. I expected the students to be excited about fresh approaches feminist scholarship offers to other disciplines. I did not expect the recitation of horrors that brought