

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

JULIA O'FAOLAIN and LAURO MARTINES, eds. — *Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

This is a terrible book. It is worth reviewing, however, because it is one of those rare books which contains, almost without exception, all the faults of its genre. Social history has come into its own in recent years and social history touches on all aspects of the lives of all people in a society. And now women's studies, whether or not one approves of them, are a fact of life (the one your mother didn't tell you?) on university campuses. The most serious threat to a valid appraisal of the role of women in history is the present proliferation of consciousness-raising courses. *Not In God's Image* is a part of that threat.

The subtitle, *Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians* attracted my attention because basic histories of women are badly needed. But O'Faolain and Martines have provided a text whose sole virtue is illustrating the errors to be avoided in compiling such a history. It is a collection of readings culled from the past to exploit the current paranoia rampant amongst some women's groups. A serious study should avoid the following errors at least, all of which — and more — are committed by the editors of *Not In God's Image*.

The scope of this work ignores the limitations imposed by its practicable size. It is not reasonable to claim to cover in 331 pages of text the "major themes in the history of Western women... from prehistoric Greece to the political and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century" even when limiting oneself geographically to "Greece, Rome, Byzantium and, from the Middle Ages on, to Europe" but including a chapter on Islam "in view of the impact of Islamic culture on mediaeval Europe" (although not, as far as I could discern from the readings, on mediaeval European women) (xiv). There is, in fact, also a ten-page chapter on the Early Hebrews, included, I presume, to allow some particularly damaging texts, by now familiar in the Movement, from the Old Testament to appear en masse. These ten pages are only two less than are devoted to Byzantium and to the Early Middle Ages and are the same number as are devoted to two thousand years of Biological and Medical views because "serious views on the subject changed little" (118). It is not possible except in a sensibly circumscribed area to give even an approach in one portable volume to a valid "close-up picture of the lives of ordinary women from different social classes: of their status, social roles, degrees of freedom or tutelage, and of the mental conditioning which has survived to leave its residue in the attitudes of our own time" (xiii). We get mostly the residue.

The editors brush aside the prickly problem of selectivity. A rough rule of thumb which accepts as "ordinary" women whose lives appear unsatisfactory in twentieth-century terms and excludes those whose lives were successful is not adequate. My own experience leads me to believe that the "queens, female regents, [and] courtesans" (xiv) whom the editors rule out in the introduction are no more extraordinary than the Countess d'Egmont whose story is quoted from the memoirs of Madame du Hausset who had it from Madame du Pompadour. The Countess was told by her mother's confessor "that she was the fruit of an adultery which her mother has been trying to expiate for twenty-five years.... Madame d'Egmont listened to all this in terror. Her mother at that instant came in, flung herself on her knees and, through her tears, begged her daughter to preserve her from eternal damnation" (241). The ordinary man or woman is hard to discover in historical records; it has been argued that a person's preservation in history is prima facie evidence of her extraordinariness. Arbitrarily to select examples for one's own purposes or to shrug off the problem with the Podsnappish dismissal — "fine distinctions falling beyond our scope" (108) — is unscholarly.

It is an error to claim that one's "book differs from others recently published in that its aim is not polemical" [xiii] and then to conclude the introduction with the paragraph:

If we think of the confrontations outside Miss World contests, we see at once that the female preference for the dependent life and its rewards is still with us. Inherited conditioning? Not entirely. There are still rewards for the ultrafeminine woman and these are no longer reserved for the upper classes. A "disadvantaged" girl may hope to grow up to be a model or a star, if she is lucky enough to have the sort of appearance that fashion demands at the time. There are not, however, enough of these rewards to go round. The more available ones—marriage and a meal-ticket—are acknowledged to be like leprechauns' gold: disappointing in the long run. The survival of the feminine woman is therefore like that of a folk-tale whose meaning has been lost. The courtship and dating rituals, habits, language and old images printed on the racial retina preserve her artificially. But the vital need which created her type—men's need to be assured that the heirs to their property were truly heirs of their own bodies—has all but evaporated from the modern world (xxi).

To pick out of such a mishmash the phrase "feminine woman" and ask what other kind there is seems like criticizing the bull for not knocking before he entered the china shop.

Fine distinctions certainly fall beyond their scope in the error the editors make in disguising the shakiness of their sources. The first section of the text is headed GREECE; the first subsection is the pre-classical period which has the further subtitle Minoan Memories. The first reading in this sub-sub-section is from Plutarch's *Lives*. The editors' introduction to this brief excerpt points out quite correctly that with the limited sources left by a society which belongs to prehistory the picture of the Minoan woman can be presented only as a surmise. But in the context even this understatement is surely unacceptable for no historian can make even a surmise from an uncorroborated source written at least eleven centuries later. She could conclude that this is what a man in the first century after Christ thought life had been like eleven hundred years earlier but without more proof she can conclude no more. And to compound the felony, on the next page the editors turn the surmise into fact for the sake of a comparison with another description (of what is not made clear), this time from Homer! The chronology of the sources is, to say no more, confusing and it does not get any better as the book moves out of antiquity. The section on the Later Middle Ages, includes, with a perverse consistency, excerpts from St. Paul, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria right through to the sixteenth century. The Early Modern Period has Madame de Maintenon cheek by jowl with A. Angiulli, 1876; and Signor Angiulli comes many pages before Immanuel Kant who leads off the final section, From the Era of Revolution to the 1850's, which includes St. Augustine and also a wood-cut, How to punish a scold, from the mid-seventeenth century, the date being given not with the picture but in the list of illustrations at the beginning of the book.

The chronological confusion is worsened by the organization of the material; the contents of the sections seem to be dictated by the noxiousness of the selections which were turned up. The first section, Greece, is subdivided chronologically; the second section, Rome, is subdivided into subjects such as Guardianship and Property, and Legal Rights, both of which one would like to see illustrated through the ages and both of which are ignored in later sections, which substitute such incommensurate headings as Virginity, Witches, The Surplus Daughter, Diaries and Letters, and Germany: Philosophers Speak of Women. Sections III to VII have no subheadings. The questioning reader is denied coherence and the opportunity to check in the text unsupported statements like "During the later Middle Ages, they [businesswomen and trades-women] begin to appear in the courts both as plaintiffs and as defendants" (146). Had they never appeared before? if they had, when did they stop? what "gradual alterations in the law" were necessary? or were the alterations in usage? The attempt to flip back through the disorganized sections to see if

I had missed an earlier relevant excerpt was unrewarding. Unrewarding for enlightenment on this point, that is, though not without compensation; it brought a smile and a last warning to my lips.

No one should edit a book, especially of this nature, if she is devoid of a sense of humour; a sense of proportion is impossible without a sense of humour. To say "The following texts reveal some discomfort in the Christian Emperors with regard to prostitution — and not a little doubt as to what belongs to Caesar, what to God" is surely inadequate to introduce this excerpt from the Theodosian Code:

If any man should wish to subject to wantonness the women who are known to have dedicated themselves to the veneration of the holy Christian law and if he should provide that such women should be sold to brothels and compelled to perform the vile service of prostituted virtue, no other person shall have the right to buy such women except either those who are known to be ecclesiastics or those who are shown to be Christian men, upon the payment of the proper price (67-8).

I cannot accept such casuistry as typical of anything except the eternal folly of mankind (in its broadest sense) and I could not present such an excerpt except in that light. But maybe my laughter prevents my seeing a wry smile behind the introductory comment.

O'Faolain and Martines would have done us all a service had they produced a much needed survey of the role of women in history. I am libby and lippy enough to object to the standard historical texts in which women appear (if they appear at all) to have had no influence on the serious march of events. History is commonly written as if men were alone on the stage of life; yet a man's political decisions or philosophy may be influenced by the experiences in his family as much as by those in his cabinet. And especially is social history concerned with all members of a society. But the balance is not to be improved by the Rosy Casals of the academic world, deriding some poor cleric like St. Augustine to raise the hackles of twentieth-century woman, preparing her to enter the chauvinist lists of whatever gender woman is. To sneer at a past society which holds different values from one's own is unimaginative, ill-informed and misleading.

I hesitate to call upon a male champion to speak for me concerning the proper attitude towards the past which should guide the preparation of any history, but John Stuart Mill is unexceptionable.

From these remarks it will be seen how greatly I differ... from those, who seeing the institutions of our ancestors to be bad for us, imagine that they were bad for those for whom they were made.... The institutions of our ancestors served passably well for our ancestors, and that from no wisdom of theirs; but from a cause to which, I am afraid, nearly all the good institutions which have ever existed, owed their origin, namely the force of circumstances.... ("The Spirit of the Age". *Examiner*, 6 February 1831).

It is in this spirit that the position of women in history should be studied and studied with scholarly honesty and accuracy. Much may be learnt about a society from an attempt to understand its attitudes towards the roles of both women and men, but the light thus shed must not be refracted by chauvinism, paranoia or (that last temptation for academics) opportunism.

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JOHN BELLAMY. — *Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages*. London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973.

The scope and complexity of this subject are enough to deter all but the most accomplished and courageous scholar. Perhaps as a consequence, L. O. Pike's *History of Crime in England* (1873-6) has had no successor until the present work. Hence, Professor Bellamy's study may fairly be regarded as a pioneer investigation, bringing old problems up to date, opening up vistas and providing a basis for future research.