

Women's Writes

Woman since she got up on her own two feet



Elise Boulding, who has spent years researching the hidden history of women, is critical of the book that is the result.

THE UNDERSIDE OF HISTORY

By Elise Boulding
Westview Press, \$24.75

The Underside of History is a gigantic (800 page) attempt to document the role of women in society from the Paleolithic era to the 20th century.

Elise Boulding tries to do a "macrohistory" of what she calls the underside—the world hidden from recorded history—the world in which women have traditionally moved—the private space—the kitchen, the market, the court-

yard, the service areas where women's culture exists. She tells us that "the history of human kind has been written as if it were the history of western man" and that this portrait of human development is only a documentation of the "overlife"—the public sphere where the course of historical events is "defined and acted upon." She wants to "recover some of the wholeness of the human identity by going back to sample the invisible side of history—to bring women to life."

After presenting us with her motivations for embarking upon such a vast project, Boulding launches into the age of the Hom-

inids to demonstrate how physiological/societal evolution has helped determine the role of women. She engages in the ongoing debate as to why women have often ended up as "sedentaries," and joins a long list of historians, anthropologists and sociologists who ask whether the role of women has increased or diminished with "advanced" civilization.

Although she doesn't give us a conclusive answer to any of these questions, she does provide enough information to make us want to dig deeper—to find more historically rooted solutions.

There is something to fascinate

and seduce everyone here. She gives us information about Eskimo women, Viking culture, nomadic life—Bedouins and Gypsies—Celts, Goths and women in both Christianity and Judaism. The material is presented with integrity and care, even when Boulding is forced to skim quickly over women's varied roles in production. Actually each section could itself be an entire text.

For example, in the discussion of the Hominids we learn that "in the Peistocene the combination of drought-induced shortages of vegetable food, biological accommodations of the female to hominid evolution and the need for babies to be carried as they lost their grasping facility, limited the female's freedom of movement at the same time that it expanded the male's."

This means that just when their hands were freed by walking upright, mothers found those hands fully occupied with babies. This came at relatively the same time as the disappearance of "heat" in the female (which allowed sexual relationships to be based more on choice) and at the same time as the invention of "home base" and the active pursuit of animals for food (which created sex-based division of labor among the hunters and the women).

When she moves to ancient Greece, Boulding presents the argument that "women had considerably more to do with creating Greek culture than is recognized. The hetairae, the independent or free women, moved within the agora (the public, social space) to debate questions of science, philosophy, mathematics, and aesthetics with the men. Sappho, as we might have guessed, was not alone as the only woman poet of the time; there were in fact 76 others. And intellectual men related to these women much as "liberal male university professors now, who want to recognize women as their colleagues but... need the reassurance that their own wives will continue to stay at home."

Once she reaches class-based society, Boulding is careful al-

ways to cover what different economic groups of women were doing at a given moment, and how these groups did or did not relate to one another. When she offers us a portrait of the uprising of the Paris Commune, it is to tell us that although women participated in many phases of the Commune and were involved in all its risks and achievements, they were not permitted to participate in political decision-making. When the 1871 Declaration of the Commune was issued, "like all previous declarations that were to inaugurate a new society it... said not a word about the participation of women."

The book becomes disappointing when Boulding tries to cover all the events of the 19th and 20th centuries. She feels the need to retell what has already been told, as well as to dig deeper to "sample" the underside. The result is that we get paragraphs of catalogued information and a skimming of events better covered elsewhere. And the mass of material Boulding is trying to cover makes it difficult to maintain the poetry and passion that made the first half of the book captivating.

Boulding herself calls the book "a failure—a travesty of the history I wanted to record." Her preface articulates every problem, limitation, eccentricity, failure of vision and bias that she believes has diminished its effect. She also lists all those women to whom she is indebted—sociologists, historians, anthropologists—who gave her just enough information to inspire years of research.

With this book she adds her own name to that list of scholars. The next person to undertake the task of uncovering a layer of what has remained invisible in women's history will have to begin where Boulding leaves off. *The Underside of History* is a precursor of many more books to come, either by Elise Boulding or others.

—Carol Becker
Westview Press is at 5500 Central Ave., Boulder, CO 80301.
Carol Becker teaches women's history and literature in Chicago.

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Women's Writes

Documentary history of women in the U.S.

THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE:
An American Documentary
By Gerda Lerner
Bobbs-Merrill, \$12.50

Despite its grandiose title, this is a worthwhile anthology of documents about American women, chiefly in the 19th century. Apparently intended as a text in American history and women's studies, it reads easily and contains valuable material for the history of socialist and feminist thought.

Over half the book comes from previously unpublished manuscripts, mostly diaries and letters. Rare printed sources contribute another third. Lerner wisely stresses material not readily available elsewhere. For example, she scans the suffrage movement but includes items on women's institution-building in health care. Most of the documents are coherent and satisfying as excerpted—an improvement over the author's useful but fragmented 1972 collection, *Black Women in White America*.

Lerner divides her book into three main sections: "The Female Life Cycle"; "Women in Male-Defined Society," that is, women in the public spheres of education, paid work, and politics; and "A New Definition of Womanhood." Many familiar figures speak to us (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth Blackwell, Louisa May Alcott) and some exciting new heroines also emerge.

We learn that Salome Lincoln, a mill worker and strike leader



Gerda Lerner, whose other books include *THE WOMAN IN AMERICAN HISTORY* and *BLACK WOMEN IN WHITE AMERICA*.

turned preacher, lectured in public in 1827, ten years before the celebrated Grimke tour. Fascinating Jane Swisshelm ran away from her husband, founded and ran a newspaper and later became a Civil War nurse. Lerner includes a sampler of documents by black, immigrant, rural and working-class women and a few pieces by men to or about women.

Her section on the life cycle emphasizes the confinement inherent in women's traditional roles. Yet her selections also illustrate the attractive warmth of the 19th century family. One girl who grew up under an oppressive Calvinist father tells us that when

she feared damnation, she insisted her father keep his arms around her. We see independent daughters learning from their mothers' examples, and we appreciate the social and familial contexts of sickness and death in women's lives.

The lack of effective birth control, Lerner argues, made 19th century American women use the language of sexual purity where we would speak of controlling our own bodies. She prints remarkable, casual letters from young Lucy Stone to her brothers and sister on the advisability of "marital restraint."

Several documents illustrate

the productive, demanding life of the preindustrial housewife. Among other tasks, Lydia Maria Childa wrote 235 letters and six newspaper articles, made three pairs of corsets, mended 70 pair of stockings and swept her house 350 times in 1864. No wonder Catherine Beecher's *Domestic Receipt Book*, a 1846 best seller, assured housewives "you really have great trials to meet."

The section on housework is closed by Mary Inman's fine 1940 analysis written for *Daily People's World*. Inman argues against the notion that the husband is the wife's employer and instead shows capitalism profiting from housework while the housewife is "robbed" both "of the value of her toil" and of "credit for doing useful labor."

The section of the book on "Women in Male-Defined Society" includes several documents on organizing women workers, as well as debates by UAW and ILWU representatives about protective legislation, equal pay and the ERA. We also hear the views of trade unionist Rose Schneiderman, socialist Lena Morrow Lewis and revolutionary Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Lerner notes how conservative and patriarchal "ideology is adapted to and transformed in the interest of class privilege" in a book advising maids how to behave. And we find the resolutions of the Salem, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention in 1850 deeply conscious of class distinctions under patriarchy. "One class of society dooms women to a life of drudgery, another to one of dependence and frivolity." They recommend instead a single standard of morality and of educational and occupational opportunity for men and all women.

The last section of the book is

the least clear in its conception. Material on "the right to her own body," focusing on birth control, protection from rape and freedom of sexual preference, seems to belong with earlier discussions of "marital restraint."

Lerner claims that Elizabeth Cady Stanton has "an astonishingly modern approach" to female self-sufficiency and that Sojourner Truth "finally and completely transcended social restraints... She personifies the liberated woman." Yet Lerner consistently underplays the Christian context of the 19th century American feminism that caused Stanton to identify her cause with "the individuality of each human soul—our Protestant idea."

Lerner's documents always speak for themselves; her editorial comments do not. She refers to women as "they," but American history as "ours." She argues persuasively that women's history will need a new periodization not based on male politics, but she provides nothing except large generalizations about industrialization and urbanization. She says women "always have been at least half of all Americans," but later refers to an undefined "sex ratio" favorable to women.

Finally, Lerner asserts that the "step-by-step progression by which women emancipate themselves intellectually... was repeated over and over again, by succeeding generations of women." Her documents provide splendid examples of such individual emancipation and of some of the organizational efforts of American women based on this new consciousness.

—Judith Kegan Gardiner
Judith Kegan Gardiner teaches English and women's studies at the University of Illinois Circle Campus.

A model for the other states to match

NYCLU GUIDE TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NEW YORK STATE
By Eve Cary
Pantheon, N.Y., 1978, \$1.65

For women (and men) who live in New York State there is now available a well-organized, easily understood, pocket-size paperback guide to women's rights un-

der the existing law and how to go about getting them. Women (and men) in the other 49 states should be so lucky.

The guide was written by Eve Cary, who served for seven years as a staff attorney for the New York Civil Liberties Union and has done two other books on related subjects, *The Rights of Students* and *Women and the Law*.

The areas covered include marriage, name change and divorce; reproductive freedom (birth control and/or abortion), pregnancy and rape; employment and unemployment; social security, welfare and taxes—not in that order. But perhaps the most valuable chapter of all is the one entitled "How to Go About Making the Law Work for You."

THE NYCLU GUIDE TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NEW YORK STATE

Eve Cary

In six pages of large print, Cary makes suggestions about the best direction in which to look for redress of grievances, gives directions on how to draw up a complaint, explains the possible results of such a step, and finishes off with a list of the addresses and phone numbers of city, state and federal agencies that are supposed to help women obtain the rights they have won on the statute books.

The book is not only eminently worth its low price for those in a geographic position to put it to use; it should also serve as a model and a motivator for women's and civil liberties groups above and beyond the Hudson. —J.S.

Farce Premises Farce Promises

Continued from page 24.

erans. As a result the movie hangs together and builds laughter and audience involvement to the last frames of the final fade.

The problems of youth.

One reason for the success of *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* and the flimsiness of its content may be the conviction on the part of its makers that "the target movie audience for commercial films is now between the ages of 15 and 30."

Zemeckis told *IN THESE TIMES* that "after 30, people just don't go to the movies. They're married and probably have a kid, and

it's too expensive or something." Whether or not this is true, the people who are making (and financing) films apparently believe it. Designing entertainment for this audience seems to mean plots about teen-age problems, played by casts whose average age is half way between 15 and 30, written and directed by prodigies to whom Stephen Spielberg (the 30-year-old creator of *Jaws* and *Close Encounters*) is an old man.

Getting born.

Another interesting contrast between the two films is the story of their birth pains.

Rivers has an established repu-

tation as a writer as well as a performer, and her husband, Edgar Rosenberg, is a successful TV producer. But when they took the screenplay of *Rabbit Test* around to studios for the necessary backing, it was turned down, as Rivers told *IN THESE TIMES*, "on the grounds that Elaine May's last picture bombed."

In the end the couple decided to do it themselves. They formed Laugh or Die Productions and began to raise the million dollars they figured they needed. Before they were through they had hosted 261 dinner parties for prospective investors and mortgaged the family home. They got the money—without the blessing of the banks, and with Rivers directing "because we couldn't afford the people we really wanted"—and the film was brought in for a few thousand under the budget.

(Last week *Variety* reported that *Rabbit Test* was the biggest box-office grosser in the nation. The investors will get their money

back and the Rivers-Rosenberg homestead will not be foreclosed.)

Zemeckis and Gale had no such struggle. They took their idea to a pair of women producers, Tarama Asseyev and Alex Rose, who were old enough to remember the actual invasion by the Liverpooldians, and on the basis of a one-sentence synopsis, they got a deal that subsidized the writing of the screenplay.

They took the finished script to Stephen Spielberg, who liked it and them, and agreed to act as executive producer. On the strength of his commitment, Universal was persuaded to put up \$3 million, provide all production facilities and handle national distribution. According to Zemeckis, Spielberg did not interfere in production decisions and may even have been responsible for restraining the studio from "normal" interference.

What next?

In a satiric farce about the way

motion pictures are manufactured, Zemeckis and Gale would have choked to death on these silver spoons. In real life, they are already at work on a second screenplay, to be directed by Spielberg, and are thinking about a third, which Zemeckis will direct and Gale will produce.

Rivers and collaborator Redack are also at work on a second script—something about a plot to kidnap an entire line of chorus girls. Money is available, but they are opting for the independence of Laugh or Die Productions. Rivers will, of course, direct.

It would be nice for all us movie-goers if she has learned from the mistakes made in *Rabbit Test* that farce is a horse that must not be allowed to get the bit between his teeth, and if Zemeckis and Gale learn from their success that once you've got a bridle on the critter, you can trust it to carry more weight than a box of popcorn and a can of diet coke.

—Janet Stevenson