The Majority Finds Its Past

PLACING WOMEN IN HISTORY

GERDA LERNER

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1979

Autobiographical Notes, by way of an Introduction

The essays in this volume were written over a span of eleven years in an attempt to develop a theory of Women's History. The first of these essays appeared in 1969, shortly before the birth of the then new women's movement and before most activists of the new feminism had begun to raise the demand for the restoration of the female past. Thus, this volume represents not only the personal intellectual growth of an individual historian, but also stages in the growth of a new field. In some ways, these essays contributed to the common consciousness, challenging earlier-held beliefs and assumptions; in some ways they represent an individual's answers to questions posed simultaneously by many historians.

Clearly, the very terminology used challenges and poses problems. Is the past gender-determined? Can there be a separate history of men and of women? And what is the content and meaning of the term "Women's History?"

Even in its surface meaning, the term "Women's History" calls into question the claim to universality which "History" generally assumes as a given. If historial studies, as we traditionally know them, were actually focused on men and women alike, then there would be no need for a separate subject. Men and women built civilization and culture and one would assume that any historical ac-

count written about any given period would recognize that basic fact. But traditional history has been written and interpreted by men in an androcentric frame of reference; it might quite properly be described as the history of men. The very term "Women's History" calls attention to the fact that something is missing from historical scholarship and it aims to document and reinterpret that which is missing. Seen in that light, Women's History is simply "the history of women."

The individual concerned with the search for what is missing from traditional history usually conceptualizes the problem that way, as a first step: The story of women "missing" from history is discovered, resurrected, and newly interpreted. Women are made to fit into the empty spaces of traditional history. Once engaged in this enterprise and confronting the vast untapped riches of primary sources, the historian becomes aware of the inadequacy of the concepts with which she must deal, of the limitations or inapplicability of the traditional questions she is asking. The search for a better conceptual framework for the history of women begins at that stage. One is led, step by step, to new definitions, to the search for more appropriate concepts, to dissatisfaction with periodization in traditional history. One searches for appropriate comparisons of "women" with other groups in society. One tries to find new conceptual models, borrowing concepts and tools from other disciplines. Women's History, at this stage, is no longer only a "field," rather it is a methodology, a stance, an angle of vision.

Women's History is a stance which demands that women be included in whatever topic is under discussion. It is an angle of vision which permits us to see that women live and have lived in a world defined by men and most frequently dominated by men and yet have shaped and influenced that world and all human events. Women's History challenges the androcentric assumptions of traditional history and assumes that the role of women in historical events—or the absence of women from them—must properly be illuminated and discussed in each and every case. Such an examination can also provide the basis for answering the other questions

asked earlier. Is the past gender-determined? Is there a different history of men and of women? Another way of posing these questions is to ask, does gender determine a person's experience, activities, and consciousness? Few would disagree with the statement that gender, like class, race, and ethnicity, is *one* determinant in shaping the individual's life. The difficulty lies in making generalizations based on our one-sided knowledge of the human past. The study of the history of women is a necessity, if only for purposes of comparison.

Women's History, finally, is both a world view and a compensatory strategy for offsetting the male bias of traditional history. It is an intellectual movement of seriousness and considerable range, which aims for a new synthesis which will eventually make its continuation unnecessary.

I came into the study of history through my work on a biography of Sarah and Angelina Grimké. As a writer of short stories, articles, screenplays, and two novels, I planned to write a fictionalized biography. I was fascinated with the lives and characters of these two women, who had not had a biography written about them since 1885. I wanted to make them come alive as persons, as they had come alive to me while reading their diaries and letters. I wanted to trace their development and growth: creatures of society emerging into selfhood; selfless advocates of reform becoming, out of their own needs, organizers of women and finally creators of feminist thought. They spoke to me in a very personal way and I wanted to transmit what I received from these women of another century to readers of my day. I had researched for about a year and I had written eight chapters, but I was dissatisfied with my lack of research skills.

My formal education had ended about twenty years earlier, when I took my "Matura," the final exam qualifying a student for admission to university training, just after the accession of the Nazis to power in Austria. I passed the exam with distinguished honor; but

instead of entering the university, I became a refugee and later made my way to America. Here I married, raised two children, and earned my living at every variety of women's jobs. And I always was a writer. It was as good an education as any for becoming a specialist in the history of women.

I worked with women at the work place and in the community and helped to organize them; I shared the experience of most ordinary women as an unskilled and later semi-skilled worker, as a housewife, a mother, a child-bearer, community activist. In all these roles and occupations I met an active and dynamic group of women, who worked quietly and without public recognition, usually without pay and frequently without an awareness of the significance of the work they were doing. I saw community organizations flourish, because there were a handful of such women in the community. Political organizations were influenced by their work, yet no one would ever know of their existence through the writings of historians or through the work of fiction writers. At the time in which I began to think of writing the Grimké biography, the movies were showing us as happy housewives puttering around spotless suburban kitchens, while the evil marriage wreckers, who always happened to be career women, gave up their happiness for ambition. The mass magazines and novels were preaching a similar message, which bore little resemblance to the life I knew. I had seen women during World War II, when they were thrust into positions of responsibility in fields in which they had little experience, maintaining the home-front economy. I knew the competent work women, even "mere housewives," were doing and so I knew from my own experience that literature, the media, and history did not reflect the realities of women's lives.

Earlier, in 1955, I had written together with the poet and playwright Eve Merriam, a musical, *Singing of Women,* which was performed off-Broadway. It was our idea to revive some of the heroic figures among American women and to celebrate their existence, their actuality. At that time what we had to say was not exactly popular; the musical, although well received and reviewed, did not

have a commercial future. Still, in preparation for it I had read the autobiographies and biographies of the major 19th-century feminists. It seemed to me appropriate and perhaps not quite accidental that I should undertake to bring to life the two forgotten women who had started the woman's rights movement.

Although I was intellectualy prepared for the task, I was seriously handicapped by my lack of academic training and my inadequate knowledge of American history. My European classicist training had been rigorous and compared favorably with the best American high school and junior college education available, but the existence of the Americas had been barely acknowledged in it. The United States and its history and culture were marginal to the ethnocentric definition of humanist knowledge of pre-World War II Austria. In the twenty years since I had left school I had been reading voraciously, with the disorganized fervor of the autodidact; by then I knew enough to know my ignorance. Yet the culture shift I had made into a foreign language, a foreign history, and a new and different system of values, was in a sense an excellent preparation for the kind of work I would be doing. It was possible, in my day, to be a European intellectual, excellently trained and credentialled, and yet to be ignorant of the history and culture of several continents. The definition of knowledge and its content was obviously subject to prejudice and bias. It took the best part of my education for me to learn that what I was learning was based on unacknowledged bias and was in need of skeptical scrutiny and revision. What I was learning in graduate school did not so much leave out continents and their people as it left out half the human race, women.

I have always stood in awe of scholarship, and never more so than when I decided to formalize what I had referred to as "taking courses" at the New School of Social Research by enrolling for credit toward a B.A. It took four years to earn by part-time study the sixty undergraduate credits I needed. Appropriately, I majored in history and literature, learning the rudiments of research technique and historical verification. Incidentially, and without any

planning or conscious effort on my part, it turned out that every paper I did on any subject whatsoever related to women. Looking over these undergraduate papers in art history, philosophy, literature, poetry, anthropology, history, and classics I realize now that I ran my own little Women's Studies major, only there was no such thing in existence then and there was no name for what I was doing. As my knowledge of historical method increased, so did my dissatisfaction with my manuscript. The discrepancy between the complexity of the historical data and my ability to interpret and fictionalize them became increasingly obvious. Sometime in my senior year I discarded the eight chapters of the fictionalized biography, decided to get professional training as a historian, and started all over again to work on a historical biography of Sarah and Angelina Grimké.[1]

While still an undergraduate at the New School I offered my first course in Women's History, "Great Women in American History" in the fall of 1962. The minimum required registration for a class was ten students and since I could not find ten people to take the class, it was cancelled. I offered it again in the spring of '63, secured a small, but sufficient enrollment, which included two retired men, and taught it another time in the fall term '63-64. To my knowledge this was the first class on the subject since a short-lived attempt had been made to teach such a class at Radcliffe in the 1930s. That spring I also gave a series of radio lectures on WBAI, entitled "Forgotten Women in American History." These were widely rebroadcast across the country and are still heard occasionally today.

In the fall of '63 I entered Columbia University as a candidate for the M.A. and Ph.D. in history. I was forty-three years old; my daughter had just entered college and my son was a senior in high school. My husband was busy with a successful career as a film-maker and teacher of film. In those days, women my age did not, generally, attend graduate school, and I was somewhat apprehensive and so, I think, were some of my professors. My mentors were my own age or somewhat younger; my classmates were, by and

large, the age of my daughter. I had shopped around before selecting a graduate school in order to be allowed to do the Grimké biography as my dissertation. Columbia was the only place where the department chairman was willing to tailor the institutional regulations so as to meet the needs of this eager, somewhat superannuated, and certainly "different" student. The topic, on which I had already been working for four years, was quickly approved for my dissertation and I was permitted to continue working on it, even before fulfilling my orals requirements. Due to this flexibility, I was able to earn both graduate degrees in three years from the time I entered, completing my course work, all the required examinations, the dissertation, and teaching for a year at the New School and for the final year at Long Island University in Brooklyn.

In a way, my three years of graduate study were the happiest years of my life. It was hard, absorbing work, constant challenges, but, mostly, it was the first time in my life I had time and space for thinking and learning. I could not have done it so quickly, if I had not had a supportive husband and son, who relieved me of many domestic responsibilities. Greedy for knowledge the way only people who have long been denied an education can be, I gave up all recreation, social life, and other interests. I was constantly aware of the twenty years I had lost and determined to compensate for them by increased concentration and effort. More than anything else I was driven by an urgency to learn what I needed to know in order to carry out a passionate ambition, which by then had taken concrete shape in my mind.

During the interview at Columbia, prior to my admission to the Ph.D. program, I was asked a standard question: Why did I take up the study of history? Without hesitating I replied that I wanted to put women into history. No, I corrected myself, not put them into history, because they are already in it, what I want to do is to make the study of women's history legitimate. I want, I said plainly, to complete the work begun by Mary Beard. This announcement was, not surprisingly, greeted by astonished silence. Just what did I have in mind saying I wanted to make women's

history legitimate? And anyway, what was women's history? The question set me off into a lengthy explanation, on which I have played variations for the past fifteen years. I ended in somewhat utopian fashion: "I want women's history to be part of every curriculum on every level, and I want people to be able to specialize and take Ph.D.s in the subject and not have to say they are doing something else. I want women's history respected and legitimized in the historical profession."

At the time this was a fairly preposterous statement to make, not only in view of my late start and insignificant status in the profession, but also in view of the novelty of the enterprise. I must have presented a rather odd picture to my professors, an excitable middle-aged woman, making grandiose statements more appropriate to an immature freshman, and yet, unmistakably possessed of some inner urgency. My mentors had the good sense not to oppose me; in fact they helped me in many ways, but they tried their best to curb my high-flown ambition and settle me down to doing solid scholarly work on my dissertation. I have always appreciated that; it was what I had come to graduate school to learn, and I saw it as good preparation for what I had set my mind on doing. Still, from the beginning, I held a unique position among my fellow students and in the department. Had I been a young woman just out of college, I probably could not have withstood the social pressure, subtle ridicule, constant discouragement, and, not infrequently, open disapproval. There were no other women there who shared my interest or supported me; in fact some of the women students were more hostile to my constantly "harping" on women than were the men. After a while, I made a place for myself and even won the respect of some of the faculty for my knowledge in what one of them referred to as my "exotic specialty." But what I learned during those years, over and above what my professors taught me, was a strategy for extracting knowledge about women from whatever sources were presented to me. I developed a set of questions, which would elicit information about women, no matter what the subject was and no matter what the

bias of the lecturer. I learned sometimes *from* my professors, often *against* them, and much by trial and error, but always I tested what I was learning against what I already knew from living. I was lucky to have had forty-three years of living behind me before entering graduate school; it was what enabled me to withstand its blandishments and to extract the maximum amount of useful knowledge from my instructors. I had sense enough to distinguish methodology from opinion; to acquire the former and skeptically test the latter. What I brought as a person to history was inseparable from my intellectual approach to the subject; I never accepted the need for a separation of theory and practice.

The pressure of time and my utopian goal were always before me. Early in my undergraduate studies I had first read Mary Beard's *Woman as Force in History*.[2] Somehow, I was able to disregard her poor presentation, her fervent, and sometimes ill-tempered rhetoric and to connect with her central idea: that women have always been active and at the center of history. I was struck, as by a sudden illumination, by the simplicity and truth of her insight. Mary Beard had arrived at that conviction the same way I had, by herself having been an engaged participant in women's work in society. In her narrative I recognized a world I knew from experience, a world in which women were active participants in the building of community and of institutions. Mary Beard's quarrel with the feminist theoreticians of her day and especially with their approach to history was due to her rejection of the idea that women were primarily victims. She went too far in that, and it led her to disregard large aspects of women's history—the structural, cultural, and sexual subordination of women and their exploitation. Beard's thinking reflects her isolation from criticism by feminist thinkers, her attachment to traditional sexual values, and, indirectly, the state of feminism during her most productive years. But implicit in Beard's work, whether she fully understood it or not, was the recognition of the duality of women's position in society—women are subordinate, yet central; victimized, yet active. Despite the fact that her rhetorical quarrel with the feminists of her day oc-

cupies much space in her writing, it is not central to Beard's thesis. Her greatest contribution is the insight that focusing on the concept of women as victim obscures the true history of women. Beard also insisted that the history of women had to reflect the variations in the status of women at any given time according to class. She did not blink the fact that women have been oppressors as well as oppressed and that class and sex interests have often been in conflict. Her methodological suggestions, her practice of comparative history, and her drawing on sources from other disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology, were a revelation to me. Long before the new feminism surfaced, reading Mary Beard raised my feminist consciousness.

Essentially, Mary Beard invented the concept of Women's Studies and Women's History. It was Mary Beard, first and foremost, whose critique of an androcentric academic establishment led her to envision new models of education for women. "Equal education for which women have clamoured," she wrote, "has merely meant the extension to women of men's education in their own history and judgements of themselves."[3] But such "history consists of threads . . . selected from men's activities in war, business and politics, woven together according to a pattern of male prowess and power as conceived in the mind of man. If the woman's culture came into this pattern in any way, it is only as a blurring of a major concept."[4] Here was a statement which expressed what during my graduate education I had experienced only vaguely as dissatisfaction with and resistance to what I was being taught. Traditional history fixed women into marginality; I knew and now found confirmation in Mary Beard's writing that this was not the truth.

As I began my first library research, I found the Mary Beard papers at the Sophia Smith Collection. These papers hold evidence of Beard's efforts for starting a Women's Studies course at Radcliffe College and of her protracted work collecting sources for the history of women and establishing a Women's History archives. I found there a two-page listing of questions, yet to be answered

about women in history, and I found a very few sentences which became my guidelines, as I tried to proceed in this endeavor. In a very real sense I consider Mary Beard, whom I never met, my principal mentor as a historian.

Most educated women, as they pass through graduate school, have suffered from the absence of female role models. They have been made to feel their marginality in their numbers, in the rules, regulations, and the hidden "old boy network" of academe, and most of all in the content of their studies. The few learned women who made their success in that man's world had to become what Mary Beard called "men's understudies." She, for what seemed to her good and sufficient reasons, chose to remain an outsider to academe, challenging it with her writing, and turning, when frustrated, to popular media and broadcasts. Her strategy for bringing Women's History into the mainstream was complex. In her own work she moved from social and labor history to a comparative study of women of different cultures; to a study of women's humor; to a popular compendium of source material on women; to her major monograph.[5] She organized the search for sources; critiqued respected establishment enterprises like the Encyclopaedia Britannica; and moved on to proposing, designing and organizing Women's Studies courses. She developed a new model for the woman intellectual, fusing theory and practice.

Encouraged by her example, I was adapting it to my uses, my own time. Unlike her, I was not willing to choose amateur and marginal status in my profession. In order to write and research the history of women, historians must have the best of traditional training and practice their craft with rigorous skill, and then they must go beyond it. Yet I, too, searched for a new definition of professionalism, different from the male academic model. As usual, it was easier to know what *not* to do than it was to know what to do.

After my dissertation defense one of my professors congratulated me and offered what was undoubtedly well-meant practical advice. If I wanted to make a career in the profession commensurate to my talents, I needed only to keep quiet about my "so-called" specialty

and stress the fact that I was a social historian and a specialist in reform history. Once established, I could then do whatever I wanted about women. I never took that advice. It was too late in my life to play career games. I was never going to be department chairman, dean, or president of one of the historical societies. I was never going to be able to make up for the time lost due to my late start. At age forty-six, I figured I had twenty years in the profession ahead of me, with luck, and so I made a twenty-year research plan, which I have followed, with only slight detours to this day. I reasoned I would have to have impact on the academic world in a number of ways in order to make Women's History accepted: by actual research and writing; by proving the existence of sources; by upgrading the status of women in the profession; by proving that there existed student demand in this subject and moving from there to designing courses and graduate programs. I made these plans in 1966 without knowledge of the spectacular progress that would be made in a short time due to the energy, zeal, and creativity of the women's movement and of Women's Studies.† I just planned for myself and, fortified with my shiny credentials, I decided once and for all to stop defending what I was doing. I would just go ahead, do my work and let it speak for itself.

I had the great good fortune, all during my dissertation research, of working in the finest private collection of women's history books then in existence, the library of Miriam Y. Holden. Miriam Holden, a member of the National Women's Party since World War I and a close co-worker of Alice Paul and Margaret Sanger prior to 1920, had dedicated herself to collecting printed sources on women of all nations, which were housed in her New York East Side brownstone. She had also worked with Mary Beard, Eugenia Leonard, and Elizabeth Schlesinger toward establishing a

†This progress and the rapid advance of Women's History scholarship accounted, certainly in some measure, for disproving at least one of my pessimistic predictions: just prior to the publication of this book I was nominated for the 1981/82 presidency of the Organization of American Historians, an honor which had not been bestowed on a woman for over fifty years.

national Women's History archives. They had written proposals, curricula, bibliographies, and position papers; they had nagged college presidents and alumnae trustees and had, for the most part failed to make a dent. Miriam Holden opened her superb library to a few scholars working on Women's History topics. I spent many weeks and months there, able to browse freely in works about women and by women spanning 300 years. In this library the history of women was a reality; the possibilities of comparative and inter-disciplinary approaches were evident. Here I connected with the feminist past of thought and activity. Working with such sources I began to formulate some of the basic questions. In order to clarify my own thinking, I wrote a number of articles; this is the way most of the essays in this book were written: working tools, stepping stones.

Revisionist theories usually begin with an argument with one's predecessors. In my case, these predecessors were 19th- and 20th-century feminist writers, who saw women's history as a manifestation of women's oppression and focused excessively on the struggle for women's rights. The most recent, and certainly indispensable book was Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle,*[6] which cut a wide swath, although it was essentially written in the woman's rights framework. Flexner's essay and footnotes were invaluable in pointing out research directions; I had already followed most of her sources and now began to formulate my own research priorities. The essay "New Approaches for the Study of Women in American History" (#1) discusses the historiography available in 1969 and poses new questions and challenges. Drawing on Mary Beard, I argued that the idea of the oppression of women, while certainly a historical fact, is of limited usefulness to historical inquiry. More important are questions like: What were women doing? How were they doing it? What was their own understanding of their place in the world? The essay calls attention to the crucially important factors of race and class and cautions against speaking of women as though they were a unified entity.

"The Lady and the Mill Girl" (#2) was actually written earlier than "New Approaches." It uses comparative history to show how women of different classes experienced the past differently and often antagonistically. It also shows how reality can turn into ideological myth. The essay was in part an outgrowth of my research in ante-bellum reform movements, in part a response to the a-historical analysis of women's place in society in a book like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and in some of the early pamphlet literature of the women's liberation movement.[7] It seemed to me essential to show the connection of current events with the past. The essay locates the creation of the "feminine mystique" in the Jacksonian era and shows how the ideology of "women's place is in the home" changed from being an accurate description of existing reality into a myth. The essay hints at, but does not solve, the problem of finding a periodization appropriate to Women's History. It shows how the Jacksonian age, a period of democratic progress and increasing egalitarianism for men, turns into one of regression and repression for women.

"The Feminists: A Second Look" (#3), written in 1970, when the new feminism was just a few years old, subjects the movement and its ideology to comparative analysis with 19th-century feminism. The essay is concerned with developing appropriate criteria and calls attention to the historic antecedents in 19th-century utopianism of many of the most revolutionary-sounding demands of the women's liberation movement. At the time I still made a sharp distinction between myself as a citizen and active feminist and myself as a scholar of the history of women. I made that distinction even as I helped to organize and served with Berenice Carroll as first Co-President of the caucus of women historians, CCWHP (Coordinating Committee of Women in the Historical Profession), in 1969, and as I organized and co-chaired with Patricia Graham the New York caucus, New York Women Historians. This proves that one can be deeply interested and involved in writing the history of women, be a citizen feminist, and yet *not* be a feminist historian.

My dissatisfaction with the analytic tools available to me continued. I had, in 1968, completed a one-volume textbook for high school and junior college use, *The Woman in American History*.[8] The need for making judgments of selection in a work of this kind, the questions raised by my various editors, and my difficulty in communicating my point of view to them, had forced me to define my concepts more precisely. In "Women's Rights and American Feminism" (#4), I tried to develop a more precise terminology. A distinction is made between "the woman's rights movement," a movement to bring women into all the structures and institutions of male-defined society on the basis of equality, and "feminism," a broad-spectrum struggle for female autonomy and self-determination. The essay challenges the appropriateness of traditional periodization for organizing the history of women and suggests alternatives. Here the influence of Juliet Mitchell's pathbreaking essay, "Women: The Longest Revolution" is clearly in evidence.[9] Women's role as breeder and child-bearer emerged as a factor essential in an ordering of the history of women. The essay also develops more fully the need for separate consideration of class, race, and ethnicity in analyzing women's past.

Ever since my dissertation research, which had revealed to me virtually unknown sources of women's history, the idea of doing a source book of primary documents had interested me. I had such a book under contract with Bobbs-Merrill Co., as part of their American Heritage Series. It was to be entitled, "Woman in the Making of the Nation." I had begun to organize the research into chapters, arranged quite traditionally according to the major periods of American political history, when I undertook a detour.

Just as I had been a premature feminist, I had also been a civil rights activist a good ten years before the civil rights movement got under way. My commitment to the issue of racial justice was deep and long-standing. My most recent activity in this connection had occurred just prior to my entering graduate school. My husband co-produced and directed the film *Black Like Me,* based on the best-selling novel by John Howard Griffin. I had written the screenplay and worked on the production with him. After that I stopped all political and social activity for the duration of my grad-

uate studies. But as I began to work on my research priorities, the absence of black women from history appeared to me as an urgent problem to be considered. In my antislavery research I had uncovered a number of unused sources for the history of black women. Now it seemed to me I would be making a contribution to the civil rights movement and to scholarship by continuing this line of research and publishing a source book for the history of black women. Another reason for making that decision was that there were certain questions I thought could only be answered by comparative history. Was the oppression of women universal, that is, did it go across class and race lines? Did women of different racial groups have the same history or was there a difference? I obtained permission from Bobbs-Merrill to postpone work on their book, so that I might first complete a documentary history of black women.

Essays #5–7 are outgrowths of my work on *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History.*[10] In #5, "Black Women in the United States: A Problem in Historiography and Interpretation," I tried to summarize all I had learned theoretically by my research for this documentary and to answer the questions, with which I had begun. My comparison between the history of black and white women had confirmed the thesis, that generalizations about the oppression of women are inadequate unless qualified by factors of race and class. Women of each racial group experience their historical subordination differently.

"The Community Work of Black Women" (#6) illustrates one instance of community-building work of women. It is typical of many examples of similar activities of black and white women, which can be documented. The fact that women of both races, under different circumstances and economic conditions, function in a similar manner seems to confirm that community- and institution-building is typical of women's work in the past.

"Black and White Women in Interaction and Confrontation" (#7) subjects the widely held myth of sisterhood among women of both races to a detailed analysis. I had shared that belief and had hoped to substantiate it through my research findings; instead I

was forced to conclude that, historically, in the U.S. setting there is more evidence of tension than of sisterhood.

The next essay (#8) "The Political Activities of Antislavery Women," although written several years later, similarly seeks to apply the analytical tools of women's history to a concrete problem. In it I attempted to devise a methodology, which would permit me to isolate the activities of antislavery women from those of antislavery men. I also wanted to test out my thesis, that women in 19th-century America had done political work and wielded political influence apart from suffrage movement activities and prior to having the vote. While that point is sufficiently proven, much more work and research must be done to develop it fully in a book-length monograph. The essay argues and offers evidence to show that men and women approached their organizational work in different ways and with different emphasis. The historical invisibility of women is often due to the fact that we look for them in exactly the same activities as are pursued by men, and thus we cannot find them. While researching the antislavery petitions in the National Archives, I found, by pure serendipity, evidence that the lecture tour of the Grimké sisters in 1837–38 resulted in a great surge of petitioning and organizing activity in the towns and villages they had visited. This should lead to an upgrading of the significance of their organizing work, which, earlier, was not possible.

"Just a Housewife" (#9) places an aspect of women's work into historical perspective, which has generally been ignored until the rise of Women's History scholarship. The essay sees women's unpaid household work as a primary causative factor in her exploitation in the work place and in her general subordinate status.

The remaining four essays, written between 1974 and 1978, mark a decisive change in my intellectual development. After my detour with *Black Women,* I returned in 1973 to the book I had under contract with Bobbs-Merrill. But "Woman in the Making of the Nation" did not progress well, although all the research was in and only the writing remained to be done. In the four years since I had first contracted for the book, the field of Women's History had

grown spectacularly. The profusion of seminars, conference panels, caucus discussions, and symposia in journals characterized the emergence of new scholarship, new questions, revisionist ideas. Women scholars had begun to work collectively, experimenting with methods for sharing their knowledge, for critiquing each other's work in a supportive, non-competitive manner. I was part of that movement and had begun to learn from the many young women, who had started on this subject later than I had, but who had brought to it their own ideas and life experiences. I now was critical of the "compensatory and contribution history" framework, in which much of my own work had been cast. It took some months of work before I realized that this was what was wrong with the book. I no longer believed that I should tell the history of women under the title "Women in the Making of the Nation." I no longer thought that a chapter organization by traditional periods was adequate. But what to substitute for it? The solution came, as so often happens, in a flash of insight—I found a new title, long before I knew how well it fitted my content. The title, "The Female Experience," gave me the clue for reorganizing my research. I gave up the old chapter plan and arranged the material according to female life stages (Childhood, Youth, Marriage and the Single State, etc.) and to stages of the growth of feminist consciousness. It was amazing how all at once the same material offered new insights and a powerful illumination. The book was finished quickly;[11] with it came new theoretical perceptions and a transformation, which went far beyond the content of the book.

What I learned in the process is reflected in the three essays, which conclude this volume. "Placing Women in History" (#10) surveys the historiography of the new field over a span of five years. It describes and critiques the stages of consciousness by which historical analysis of women has progressed, from compensatory and contribution history, to the new social history, and, most recently, woman-oriented history. The essay suggests for the first time that all efforts to treat women as a sub-group—minority, class, caste—are doomed to failure. It also challenges previous attempts at building a single conceptual framework for the history of women.

Women are half of humankind, evenly distributed in all strata of society. Their culturally determined and psychologically internalized marginality seems to be what makes their historical experience essentially different from that of men. But men have defined their experience as history and left women out. For women, all history as we now know it, is pre-history.

This definition of traditional history as not only male-oriented, but male-defined, is further explored in "The Majority Finds Its Past" (#11). What is needed in order to correct the distorted picture presented by traditional history is woman-centered analysis. What would the past be like if women were placed at the center of inquiry? What would the past be like if man were regarded as woman's "Other"? Even to pose such a question only as an intellectual exercise shifts one's angle of vision. The very categories and criteria by which historians have ordered the past have become questionable. The possibility of the existence of a female culture within the dominant patriarchal culture cannot be ruled out and should be tested out in each specific case.

The final essay, "The Challenge of Women's History," summarizes the ways in which Women's History challenges traditional scholarship. It offers a radical critique of traditional history and postulates a two-stage development leading to the formulation of a new "universal history," a history in which men and women will have equal significance. First, the uncovering and interpretation of the female past; second the synthesis of it with traditional history, which would include both the development of patriarchy and the development of feminist consciousness as important aspects of the historical experience.

The changes in consciousness and historical thought which lead to the definitions in this volume are the work of an individual, yet they reflect a collective effort and owe their existence to the changes in thought and consciousness represented in the women's movement, which inspired that collective effort. Women working on Women's History have tried to bring feminist consciousness to bear not only on the content but on the method of their work. There has been a deliberate effort to foster the development of

Women's History by group work, sharing of knowledge and sources and, at times, collective research and writing. The flourishing network of Women's History study groups, conferences, and conventions, all animated by a spirit of cooperation and the enthusiasm appropriate to pioneers, has greatly accelerated the maturing of this field and of its practitioners. Collegiality has turned into sisterhood, which has for many of us become a meaningful intellectual and spiritual community. The justification for my tracing my personal intellectual growth as an introduction to this volume is that it has significance beyond that of one woman thinking about the past of women. My thinking took place at a time when many other women began to ask questions similar to my own and began to act on these questions, thereby creating a new context for thought. Feminist consciousness begins with self-consciousness, an awareness of our separate needs as women; then comes the awareness of female collectivity—the reaching out toward other women, first for mutual support and then to improve our condition. Out of the recognition of communality, there emerges feminist group consciousness—a set of ideas by which women autonomously define ourselves in a male-dominated world and seek to substitute our vision and values for those of the patriarchy. The two aspects of my own consciousness, that of the citizen and that of the woman scholar, had finally fused: I am a feminist scholar.

Historians engaged in the quest for shaping autonomous definitions of self, experience, and history are, of necessity, searching for new intellectual tools for our work. We are creating the means as we are defining the goals. We have not, as yet, created the new conceptual framework for the history of women, which will be created. These essays represent my contribution to that effort. They are my working tools and the sign posts I have set up along the way on a road of discovery, which is leading both into the past and into the future.

The Majority Finds Its Past

It should be obvious by now that Women's History is not an "exotic specialty," a temporary, politically inspired "fad." It will not be sidetracked; it will not go away. Women's History is a strategy necessary to enable us to see around the cultural blinders which have distorted our vision of the past to the extent of obliterating from view the past of half of humankind.

For these reasons, women's history poses a final, most serious challenge to scholarship and societal values.

VII. Women's history asks for a paradigm shift.

It demands a fundamental re-evaluation of the assumptions and methodology of traditional history and traditional thought. It challenges the traditional assumption that man is the measure of all that is significant, and that the activities pursued by men are by definition significant, while those pursued by women are subordinate in importance. It challenges the notion that civilization is that which men have created, defended, and advanced while women had babies and serviced families and to which they, occasionally and in a marginal way, "contributed."

Civilization consists of the integrated activities of men and women, based on a gender-based division of labor. Changes in the division of labor and in the relation of the sexes are in themselves historical phenomena and must be treated as such.

What is needed is a new universal history, a holistic history which will be a synthesis of traditional history and women's history. It will be based on close comparative study of given periods in which the historical experiences of men are compared with those of women, their interactions being as much the subject of study as their differences and tensions. Only after a series of such detailed studies has been done and their concepts have entered into the general culture can we hope to find the parameters by which to define the new universal history. But this much can be said already: Only a history based on the recognition that women have always been essential to the making of history and that *men and women* are the measure of significance, will be truly a universal history.

Notes

Introduction

1. Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels against Slavery* (Boston, 1967); published as a paperback with new subtitle: *Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* (New York, 1971).
2. Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History* (New York, 1946; reprint 1962).
3. Ann Lane (ed.), *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook* (New York, 1977), p. 204.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
5. Mary R. Beard, *A Short History of the American Labor Movement* (New York, 1930; reprint, Westport, Conn., 1971); *On Understanding Women,* (New York, 1931); *Laughing Their Way: Women's Humor in America* (New York, 1934); *America Through Women's Eyes* (New York, 1933); *The Force of Women in Japanese History* (Washington, D.C., 1953). See also: *Women's Work in Municipalities* (New York, 1915).
6. Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).
7. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963); cf: *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation,* 371 Somerville Avenue, Somerville, Mass. 02143; "Notes From the First Year," *Journal of New York Radical Women* (June 1968).
8. Gerda Lerner, *The Woman in American History* (Reading, Mass., 1971).
9. Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution* (Boston, 1966; reprint from *New Left Review,* Vol. 40, Nov.–Dec. 1966).
10. Gerda Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972).
11. Gerda Lerner, *The Female Experience: An American Documentary* (New York and Indianapolis, 1977).