

grew out of her subsequent teaching experiences. While one might wish that the lecturer's habit of detailed advance summaries for each section and a methodical collective summary at the conclusion of the book were less mechanical in character, one must admire the judicious manner in which, avoiding any extravagant claims, she has assessed the scholarly achievements and educational influence of women humanists and reformers. This is, I believe, the first book exclusively on this subject, but it will undoubtedly not be the last. Although the book offers an admirable introduction to her topic, the tentativeness of some of Warnicke's conclusions, her reminder that such studies are especially difficult because the records of the women in question have often "been selectively destroyed because they were deemed of little value", and her questioning of a number of previous historians' views are matters that are bound to challenge others to engage in further research, the results of which will owe much to the groundwork of Warnicke.

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Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Quest for Status. Lois A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge. *Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983. Pp. 308.*

Religious activity in North America has shown a frequent tendency to ignore the border between Canada and the United States. Because that is so, and because research on the history of women and religion is still in its infancy in this country, there is reason to be doubly grateful for the quality and quantity of work on the subject published in the United States since the late 1960s. The authors of *Presbyterian Women in America* are clearly at home with this new historiography, and their work is a useful addition to it.

Boyd and Brackenridge are not the first scholars to look critically at American Presbyterian women's relations with their church, but theirs is the first comprehensive survey on the subject.¹ Their book contains a chapter on women's experience within the conservative southern wing of the denomination, but its authors' main concern is to describe the growth of organized women's work, the quest for full lay and clerical rights, and the development of church-based careers for women in the northern and largest strand of American Presbyterianism. While they write from what is generally a liberal feminist perspective, theirs is by no means a complacent account of steadily accumulating gains for the women of the church—their treatment of the crucial 1920's decade and their caution about recent 'victories' make this particularly clear. For anyone interested in women's role within North American Protestantism, their study will be of value simply for the wealth of information it provides. But beyond this, by locating the experiences and aspirations of a particular group of middle-class women firmly within their denomination's tradition and history, Boyd and Brackenridge help make it possible for modern feminists to understand and sympathize with their priorities.

The authors deal briefly with the period 1789-1870 when a combination of factors led Presbyterian churchmen to develop a rationale for sanctioning women's participation in religious activities outside the home. "Pious females" could be "ornamental and useful in the House of God", it was maintained, so long as they confined themselves to activities that were "an extension of their maternal and subordinate nature". During this period, a change took place from purely local, often non-sectarian activities with a variety of benevolent objectives, to larger, denominational organizations whose focus was increasingly missions-oriented and whose keynote phrase was "woman's work for woman." It was not until the 1870s, during what the authors call the "Church Woman's Decade", that there developed the regional and national missionary

organizations that were to serve as such effective vehicles for demonstrating churchwomen's abilities as fund-raisers, administrators and publicists. With other scholarly and popular writers who have studied this development in American Protestantism, Boyd and Brackenridge maintain that Civil War work was a pivotal factor in preparing women for their expanded roles in the church.

The authors emphasize the contradictions that characterized Presbyterian women's relations with their church. Year after year, men in the General Assembly paid fulsome tribute to women's accomplishments in foreign and frontier missions while experiencing a growing sense of unease with women's initiative. Women's organizations that were separate from and auxiliary to the male mission boards had come about, the authors show, as a direct result of the church's interpretation of scripture and dogma. Yet, as these separate organizations began to function as outstandingly successful fund-raising agencies, and to wield an unexpectedly strong influence on mission policies, they helped women to establish a separate feminine power base and to divert funds from the general schemes of the church.

The uneasy feeling that women had built up a "church within the church" contributed in the 1920s to a Presbyterian version of the 'search for order.' Determined to reduce the many boards that had built up over the years, church officials embarked on a process of consolidation that had far-reaching consequences for women's work. Without even the formality of consulting the female executives most directly concerned, the General Assembly abolished the women's national boards for home and foreign missions and subsumed their work under general boards. While women would henceforth have representation on these boards, they would always be in a minority. Presbyterian women's reaction to the change was almost uniformly negative, Boyd and Brackenridge maintain, but the majority

were too much inhibited by a long tradition of denominational loyalty to express their grievances publicly.

In the second section of their book, the authors argue that the same disinclination to air their ecclesiastical dirty linen in public contributed to churchwomen's lack of success in obtaining full lay and ecclesiastical rights when that issue came to a head in the same decade. Sporadic efforts to obtain such rights had occasionally been mounted in the nineteenth century, and notwithstanding the General Assembly's continued adherence to Pauline injunctions against women's speaking or preaching in mixed church groups, pragmatic concessions in this direction had increasingly been made. But the ban remained on the ordination of women as ruling elders or ministers, a ban which effectively prevented them from taking any part in church government beyond the congregational level. In the face of changes taking place in secular society in the post-war era, and of evidence of feminine dissatisfaction, the church in 1926 appointed a commission comprised of the former heads of the women's home and foreign mission boards to investigate the woman question. The commission's findings revealed that the abolition of the women's missionary boards remained the chief grievance of most active churchwomen; the majority were simply unaware of or uninterested in the larger but less immediate issues of freedom and equality within the church. An identifiable group, "not large but intellectually keen", cared so deeply about women's secondary status that they seldom participated in any church organization, but even they refrained from criticizing their church publicly. They thus made it possible for the church to stop at a half-measure: in 1930, Presbyterian women were granted the right to be ordained as ruling elders, but it was to be another twenty-six years before they gained access to the ministry. Even then, the authors maintain, women's victory was more technical than real, for until the church was forced to change by the pressure of a new wave of feminism

its policies and procedures remained woefully incongruent with its formal stand on ecclesiastical parity.

Boyd and Brackenridge provide so much useful information that inadequacies and omissions in their work are particularly frustrating. The last two sections lacked the thoroughness and thematic unity of the first two. Perhaps because it is closest to my own research interest, I found the chapter on career missionaries especially disappointing. The authors suggest, for instance, that despite the missionaries' unconventional roles and their unique opportunities abroad, they were not notably active on behalf of women's rights. But they do not consider the possibility that the feminist energies of such women may have been aroused and absorbed by the often tempestuous politics of the mission field (as was the case for many late nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterian missionaries). This chapter, in fact, reflects the scarcity of completed studies to date on the backgrounds and career experiences of women missionaries. Other important questions also remain largely unexplored. For example, what part did Presbyterian women play in the social gospel, a movement in which their church played a leading role, and which was at least comparatively sympathetic to women's rights? How important were family, marital and social ties in constraining would-be Presbyterian feminists from criticizing upholders of the status quo? Did Presbyterian women attempt to use the relatively more liberated position of their Methodist sisters as a lever to improve their own? And how did they respond to the radical critiques of Christian anti-feminism published in the 1890's by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Jocelyn Gage? The case of Cady Stanton—herself a former Presbyterian—is particularly relevant: her *Woman's Bible* was disavowed even by other prominent feminists, and regarded by most clergymen as simply beyond ridicule. In all likelihood, had leading Presbyterian women mounted a public critique, however cautious, of their church's sexism, it would have

cost them their place within the church establishment. And that place, as Boyd and Brackenridge demonstrate, involved a good deal of power and prestige, if not formal authority. Pragmatic self-interest must surely be added to denominational loyalty and scripturally rooted conservatism as explanations for Presbyterian women's quiescence. That being the case, it is not surprising that some of the best publicized and most forceful calls for women's rights within the church came from men. Finally, the usefulness of this work would have been considerably increased for non-Presbyterian readers if the authors had included at least a brief description of the Presbyterian system of church government and organization, and a table listing the several Presbyterian denominations discussed in the volume, abbreviations and dates of unions.

Yet these criticisms should not obscure the fact that *Presbyterian Women in America* is a well-written, valuable book, one that takes us beyond generalities about "soft" feminism to the realities of a specific case.

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NOTES

1. Elizabeth Howell Verdesi's *In But Still Out: Women in the Church*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), focuses mainly on the first half of the twentieth century and does not include women's work in and on behalf of foreign missions.

"Traitors to the Masculine Cause": The Men's Campaign for Women's Rights. Sylvia Strauss. *Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982. Pp. 290*

Sylvia Strauss states at the outset that her purpose in writing "*Traitors to the Masculine Cause*": *The Men's Campaign for Women's Rights* was to trace the evolution over more than one hundred years of male support for women's rights. This is clearly an interesting question; recent studies such as Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man!*