

The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New Eng- land, 1780-1835.

NANCY COTT. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977. Pp. 225.

If there is one motif that predominates in Nancy Cott's study of "woman's sphere" in nineteenth-century New England, it is the duality and double edge inherent in the domesticity assigned to, and accepted by, women. The very title of her study plays on the double meaning of "bonds." Taken from the letters of Sarah M. Grimke, the noted abolitionist and feminist, the phrase connotes bonds that tie women together as well as bonds that tie them down. The central purpose of Cott's book is to explain the seeming paradox suggested by the simultaneous appearance of feminism and the cult of domesticity in the 1830s. As such, it is an essay on the nineteenth rather than the eighteenth century. To her credit, Cott has gone back to the earlier period for clues to the configurations of the early nineteenth century.

The study utilizes letters and accounts written between 1780 and 1835 by 100 women. Half of these women belonged to the middle class and the rest to the upper middle class. The author cautions the reader that these are probably the more articulate of the middle class; nevertheless, she occasionally lapses into sweeping

generalizations for all middle class women. (See p. 185) Despite this quibble, the reader will appreciate the uncovering of many heretofore unknown and unpublished personal accounts and letters from this period. They, as well as the sermons cited, are conveniently listed in the bibliography along with their locations.

Five aspects of women's lives occupy the bulk of the volume. Work, domesticity, education, religion and sisterhood are treated in separate chapters. In a period of intensive social and economic change in the U.S. one expects the work roles of women to undergo some shifts, but as Cott cautions, the historian must be aware of the continuities as well as the changes. Thus, women's secondary economic role in this period limited the effects of these shifts. The primary difference developed in the distinction between the work roles of unmarried and married women. As factory production replaced domestic manufacture, unmarried daughters no longer worked at home to earn their keep but found themselves in the textile mills or in a teaching position. Married women's work remained in the household and outside of the cash nexus.

The association of married women's work with domesticity and especially child nurture was strengthened by changing ideas of educational psychology which were reflected in the grow-

ing numbers of advice books on family life, child rearing and women's role in the 1820s and 1830s. Ministers expounded on the importance of female nurture and reiterated that motherhood was a vocation deserving full attention. Building on the previous work of Kathryn Sklar (Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity, New Haven, 1973), Cott states that domesticity was intended to implant, in the family, social control of a kind that seemed necessary and appropriate in a democratic republic. (p. 94) Ever since the Revolution, the family and proper education had been stressed as conducive to stability and virtue in a political system which lacked the controls of a class society. Class differences were vehemently denied in the early republic and, in fact, throughout American history. Thus, argue Sklar and Cott, sex and race classifications provided social distinctions which maintained order but did not recognize class. In the turbulent Jacksonian period Cott argues, domesticity provided a levelling influence because it encompassed all women in the vocation of wife and mother. Accordingly, women's education was shaped to the needs of domesticity; educators like Beecher advocated a standardized education for women which would prepare them for the vicissitudes of rapid mobility.

Religion was closely tied to the development of domesticity. A spurt

of evangelical activity in the early nineteenth century took the form not only of a Great Awakening, but also of the organization of associations in which women played a major role. These associations for prayer, mission activities, moral reform and maternal education intersected with the new interest in childhood and child nurture. As Cott points out, these new associations, encouraged by ministers and the influence of the revival served to establish the importance of a separate female religious identity which eventually led to a questioning of gender roles and a public role for women.

Religious revival also added to the impulse towards female friendship, the subject of chapter 5. The identification of women with the heart (a subject also explored by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg)* implied that the only truly reciprocal relationships for women were with other women. Cott views the emergence of the women's rights movement as hinging on the "appearance of women as a discrete class" and the development of a "new kind of group consciousness." (p. 194)

*"The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs, I (1975) pp. 1-29.

The Bonds of Womanhood provides many insights into the cult of domesticity. The exploration of the connections between domesticity and religion are particularly striking. Drawing on the earlier work of Barbara Welter, Mary Ryan and others, Cott suggests that the egalitarian feminism of Wollstonecraft and the American "Constantia" disappeared under the influence of evangelical protestantism only to reappear after 1835 in connection with Quakerism, Unitarianism and radical sectarianism.

The flaws that mar the book are mostly conceptual in nature. Cott relies too uncritically on "modernization" to explain general economic change in the introduction and chapter 1. Her reference in chapter 5 to "women as a discrete class" is not supported or discussed and leaves the reader confused as to the implications intended. Moreover, despite her recognition of the double edge of domesticity, Cott clearly favors the revisionist view which imbues woman's sphere not only with a supportive female subculture, but also with an implied social power base. The nature of that "power" has been largely unexplored by proponents of the revisionist school in women's history and would make a useful companion piece to this study.

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The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History
SUSAN MANN TROFIMENKOFF and ALISON PRENTICE (eds.). Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977. Pp. 192.

The Neglected Majority presents an interesting tapestry of history in eight articles and one bibliographical essay, each dealing with a different aspect of women in Canadian society from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Although most of these essays have been published elsewhere, this collection remains invaluable as it combines all the essays in one volume and therefore can become a useful guide for the teaching of the history of women in Canada.

The essays vary in style, quality and length beginning with Isabel Foulché-Delbosc's work on "Women of Three Rivers: 1651-63" and ending with Ruth Pierson's "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labour Force in World War II." The time period covered is extensive and the reader can easily recognize the multitudinous roles woman played, from her appearance in the first Canadian settlements and the fur trade to her presence in the labour force during the Second World War. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, in a well-edited volume, have chosen articles that depict the unique role of women as experienced in Canada and have shown that they played an impor-