



REVEALING  
WOMEN'S LIFE STORIES





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*Papers from the*  
*50th Anniversary Celebration of the*  
SOPHIA SMITH COLLECTION  
*Smith College, Northampton,*  
*Massachusetts*

*September 1992*



*Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives reading room, 1983 ♣ photographer unknown*

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*The first home of the Sophia Smith Collection, the "Archives Room" in Neilson Library, as it appeared in 1961* ● photograph by W. H. Kilham, Jr.

## INTRODUCTION

*Sherrill Redmon*  
*Head of the Sophia Smith Collection*

❖ The fiftieth birthday of the Sophia Smith Collection is surely grounds for celebration. Back in 1942, when Smith College committed itself to the preservation of the record of women's lives and work, few could have anticipated the key role that this cornucopia of women's letters, diaries, photographs, organizations' records, periodicals, and other primary material would play in making possible the broadening of historical inquiry to include women's experience and achievements. From the acorn Margaret Storrs Grierson '22 planted and skillfully tended for its first twenty-three years, the collection has grown to a sturdy oak of more than four hundred manuscripts collections occupying 5,000 linear feet, and 650 current and historical periodical titles. The closely linked and equally extensive Smith College Archives, which she directed simultaneously, documents all aspects of the history of a pioneering women's college and holds another 225 manuscripts collections of faculty, administrators, and students.

I regret that when the Sophia Smith Collection turned fifty in such style on September 25-26, 1992, I was occupied building a women's manuscripts collection in another part of the country. Almost immediately upon my coming to Smith late in 1993, however, I began to hear about Jane White's winning performance, Amy Hague's evocative exhibit on the Collection's origins, and the trio of stimulating lectures on women's biography. In undertaking to publish the proceedings of that event, our aim is foremost to pay tangible and durable tribute to Margaret Grierson and her staff. Their imagination, discrimination, patience, and hard work set a high standard for all who have followed. We also wish to thank the participants by presenting their work in a more permanent form. Nancy Cott, Ellen Chesler, and Carolyn Heilbrun admirably represent the scholarly community whom we serve. By placing their own personal and professional papers in our care, Carolyn Heilbrun and Jane White joined the other class of individuals upon whom our success hinges: the manuscripts donor community. On their considerable merits, these talks deserve an airing beyond the gathering of women's historians, col-

lege faculty, students, and friends who were fortunate enough to hear them delivered live.

The quality of the symposium is especially noteworthy, considering that in the months leading to it, the fates conspired to send three key Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives staff members off to other pursuits. To their eternal credit, the remaining four staff pulled together to complete all the tasks that go into hosting a conference with no interruption in service to researchers or adverse effect on other normal duties. Their success owes much to the backing of the Library administration, the superior organizing skills of College Archivist and then acting Sophia Smith Collection Director Margery Sly, and the heroic effort expended by her and the remaining staff—Assistant Curator Amy Hague, Archives Specialist Maida Goodwin, and Administrative Assistant Araina Heath.

We also gratefully acknowledge the many contributions of the Anniversary Committee members: in addition to the staff they were Caroline Dwight Bain '44, ex-chair, Friends of the Library; Susan Bourque, director, Project on Woman and Social Change; Rebecca Carr '93, Janet Durkin, assistant director, Development Office; Daniel Horowitz, professor, American Studies; Richard Millington, associate professor, English department; Mary Shaw Newman '50, chair, Friends of the Library; Rosemary O'Connell Offner '53, executive secretary to the Friends of the Library; Nancy Steeper '59, executive director, Alumnae Association; and Emily Weir, publications writer, College Relations.

Capably moderating the symposium and introducing the speakers were historian-in-training Kathleen Banks Nutter '90; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, professor of history; and Sarah M. Pritchard, Director of the Smith College Libraries.

My colleagues tell me that the success of the event owed immeasurably to the tireless efforts of Phyllis Paige AC '80. President Mary Maples Dunn, former director of the Sophia Smith Collection, Susan Grigg, the Friends of the Smith College Library, Stacey Schmeidel, Pat and Joe Cote, Ellen Safford Goodwin '44, Sarah Black, and Alison Scott assisted with everything from planning, funding, and publicity to food, flowers, programs and sparkling premises.

Finally, I am pleased to recognize the contributions of numerous folks to

this volume. I gratefully acknowledge Margery Sly's efforts in getting it started. In the year following the celebration she both chaired the search committee for the new head of the SSC and managed to gather authors' manuscripts and begin editing them with the assistance of Elizabeth Power Richardson '43. When I came aboard we made an editorial decision that partly accounts for the delay in the volume's appearance. I didn't think a record of that happy occasion would be complete without making use of the exhibit "Never...Another Season of Silence" which chronicled the SSC's own revealing life story. Special thanks to Amy Hague for accepting the challenge of transforming an exhibit into an essay. Maida Goodwin performed editing, expediting, and shepherding of copy and illustrations into print.

Carolyn Heilbrun has observed that for many women attaining age fifty kindles new life. May the next generation of friends of women's history reflect that passing this milestone can also breathe new life into an institution.



We are grateful to Fred Fehl for generously granting permission to publish his photograph of Jane White and to Ursula K. Le Guin and Virginia Kidd for allowing us to reprint a portion of one of Ms. Le Guin's poems. Diligent efforts have been made to secure permissions from all photographers whose works we have used. Our thanks also go to those we did not succeed in reaching.



## WELCOME

*Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*

*Professor of History and of American Studies, Smith College*

✿ We today openly and freely celebrate what is to us a treasure house of information and insight into women's lives in the past. We recognize its importance not just for Smith College but for the world of scholarship and public policy in this country and in the world. It is the critical repository for papers that detail women's efforts in employment, birth control, suffrage, education, women's organizations, and the women's movement. On its shelves are letters, diaries, manuscripts, photographs, and periodicals. It holds organizational records and papers of individual women, the stuff from which biography is written—the documentary base indeed of the talks today.

What is striking to me as one who has looked into the history of Smith College at its founding is that the collection began in many ways not unlike the college, a cautious experiment that was looking over its shoulder to be sure no "feminist" or "bumptious women" were following in its wake. But what was different in 1942 was that in addition to those concerned about limiting women to their proper place were courageous spirits, such as Margaret Grierson, who were determined to undermine those efforts. Unlike today's women, they could not move out in the open, but they could endure, collect the rich resources of women's experience, and wait until a better day. They did, the Sophia Smith Collection developed, and now in this different era we can proclaim its glories openly and unabashedly. As we do, we pay tribute to the wisdom, the cleverness, and the persistence of Margaret Grierson and the directors and staff who have succeeded her.

As part of that tribute, Amy Hague, who has been on the staff of the Sophia Smith Collection since 1988, mounted an exhibit on the founding and early days of the Collection entitled "Never...Another Season of Silence." Her paper is an adaptation of that exhibit.

“NEVER...ANOTHER SEASON OF SILENCE”: LAYING THE  
FOUNDATION OF THE SOPHIA SMITH COLLECTION, 1942-1965\*

Amy E. Hague



Margaret Storrs Grierson, 1946  
☛ photograph by Eric Stahlberg

☛ Smith College President Herbert Davis proposed to the Friends of the Smith College Library in 1941 that they take on as a special project a collection devoted to works of women writers. Margaret Storrs Grierson, Smith College Archivist since 1940, was appointed Executive Secretary of the Friends of the Smith College Library and Director of the Women's Collection in 1942.<sup>1</sup> Davis' idea of a literary collection soon evolved in a different direction.

There was some difference of opinion about what the new collection would be. According to Grierson, President Davis was “not clear in his own mind” about what he wanted, and the historian, Mary Ritter Beard, “rather hoped that [Smith] would be interested in carrying on the work of the recently abandoned Women's Archives [World Center for Women's Archives (WCWA)],” which she had founded in 1935. Within the first year the scope

\*“[W]e still wonder at the stolid incapacity of all men to understand that woman feels the invidious distinctions of sex exactly as the black man does those of color, or the white man the more transient distinctions of wealth, family, position, place and power... It was not from ignorance of the unequal laws and false public sentiment against woman that our best men stood silent... but because in their heart of hearts... they did not feel for her the degradation of disfranchisement... But standing alone we learned our power. We repudiated man's counsels forevermore; and solemnly [we] vowed that there should never be another season of silence until woman had the same rights everywhere on this green earth as man.” (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 2, 1889, p. 265-268.)

of donations, coupled with Beard's influence, mandated that the project be redefined as a "special historical collection of women's materials, recording women's interests and activities in the course of human history and across the face of the earth...."<sup>2</sup>

The donations, many from interested Smith alumnae, were indicative of a growing consensus of what the new collection should be:

*...Such a collection would be primarily of historical value, almost surely offering...fresh material from which to rewrite the pages of our country's history....The primary concern of gathering material on American women from colonial days onward should not, however, lead to the rejection [of] material on women of other nations....Among the Friends of the Smith College Library, many are especially eager...that the collection should be...differently formulated and would, I am sure, be of lively assistance in the plan....This is the sort of collection which will gather impetus as it grows. I believe that we have good opportunity to develop a collection which...may be distinguished....<sup>3</sup>*

As the collection grew, so did the proportion of manuscript to published materials and its recognition by a national community of scholars. Margaret Grierson explained her role in shaping the Collection's development in these early years:

*President Davis did toss off the idea of a collection of the writings of literary women, and I have been busy for years redefining the thing to make sense of it. In the process, I have more or less quietly won the approval and support and clarification of many intelligent alumnae and non-Smith women....I am the only one on campus who knows the women's field at all, and I have met only with support from the president although I have gone slowly, perhaps a little deviously, relying on accomplished fact to argue for me....In any case, I think you will understand how I came to go ahead...of the comprehension of those whose plan it is supposed to be. I am convinced that it is so sound and valuable an enterprise that it must be developed as fast as possible....<sup>4</sup>*

By 1946, it had become clear that Grierson's plans for strengthening the Collection's identity and its rapid growth were being realized, yet it still had

no official name. According to Grierson, “the name of [Smith College’s] founder was not used for other purposes,...and it seemed fitting to adopt the name of the woman who had founded the college to provide women with an education equivalent (not equal) to that offered men, for the collection which was to provide a better knowledge of the accomplishment of women through the ages....”<sup>5</sup> Thus the Women’s Collection became the Sophia Smith Collection (SSC).

*“The Restraint of a Wise Woman in the Presence of a Noisy Woman”<sup>6</sup>*

Margaret Grierson and the Sophia Smith Collection were the inheritors of a mission Mary Beard had embarked upon almost ten years earlier when she founded the WCWA. Historian Nancy Cott has described the ways in which Beard’s “unique message” was too advanced for her audience:

*Her insistence that women have always been central to history-making helped bring to life our current understanding of gender as a category of historical analysis....And if women’s history at present is still the “other,” not the mainstream history despite its vital supports and the tremendous energy of its practitioners, how much more risky at her time—though crucial to ours—must we acknowledge the efforts of Mary Ritter Beard to have been? The full realization of her best insights...still lies ahead of us.*

One of Beard’s insights was that the addition of women to the academy would not ensure attention to the history of women as long as women faculty “frequently out-Herod Herod in academic sterility.” She expressed her disgust with the state of women’s education in a note sent to Margaret Grierson: “There can be nothing sillier in this world than for men to assume that they know how to educate women—except women’s letting them do it—both being totally ignorant of women’s history!” She reserved special contempt for women faculty members at Vassar whom she encountered during a visit to discuss her book *On Understanding Women* in the early 1930s. Beard remembered that the “women teachers cried as if one voice: ‘The time has come to forget women!... We are becoming human beings.’ With no little heat,” Beard retorted, “[Y]ou can easily forget women. You know nothing

to remember.”<sup>7</sup>

Many others had difficulty absorbing Beard's ideas, which only further fueled her crusading spirit. Frederick L. Allen, *Harper's Magazine* editor, was one of the unenlightened: “We have held your manuscript much too long, only to have to confess ourselves bewildered by it. I read it when it first came in and felt that I didn't quite know what it was about the history of women's accomplishments that was not generally known, and I found later that the other editors share my puzzlement. I hate to say this to so distinguished a writer, but that's how it is.” Beard seized the opportunity to educate Allen by sending “the...more detailed meaning of that article.” When he replied that “I really begin to understand what seems to have missed me,” Beard proposed to Margaret Grierson that she use the exchange as “evidence that education seems possible as well as needed” in making the case to Smith College President Benjamin Wright.<sup>8</sup>

Mary Beard's remedy for such widespread ignorance about women in history was education. The basis of that education was the papers and records which would restore the human memory of women's place in history. Her conception of the WCWA “as a political venture, the basis for an educational revolution, and the site from which women's public protests and social leadership might emanate...” was an ambitious reply to the naysayers who doubted there was any such thing as women's history.<sup>9</sup>

Many prominent women supported Beard's effort to promote the study of women in history, and in spite of financial difficulties and discord among the leadership, Beard amassed a large collection of primary research material. When the enterprise folded in 1940, the responsibility for collecting and preserving the record of women in history fell to existing institutions. As part of her crusade to persuade colleges and universities to include books and primary resources about women in their libraries and curricula, Beard distributed WCWA collections to a number of institutions. Radcliffe College's initial response to Mary Beard's offer was lukewarm, but Smith College, represented by Margaret Grierson, was enthusiastic about collecting the raw material of women's history. After Beard's death, in a condolence letter to her son William, Grierson gave her friend full credit for helping to shape the Sophia Smith Collection: “I hope, and believe, that you know the essential role that Mary Beard had in the conception and creation of [the SSC]....It was

she who patiently led us to a clear understanding of the significance of women in history and to a clear conception of the proper nature of our research collection.”

Mary Beard was always ready to lend her energy and connections with key people to the Sophia Smith Collection. In 1942, President Davis expressed his gratitude to Beard for sending manuscripts for the new collection, and for encouraging him in the project of “making a special collection at Smith College of the works of women writers, and of original documents particularly concerned with women’s part in American culture....” Grierson recalled that Beard’s “challenging letters and frequent visits, her gifts and introductions, provided direction to the shaping of the end and aim of the Sophia Smith Collection,” and incidentally forged a lasting friendship between the two women. Grierson further described the importance of Beard’s support to William Beard: “Through the years of struggle against academic conventionalism, fear of ‘feminism,’ lack of adequate support of administration, insufficient financial backing, Mary Beard’s courage and sure faith in the outcome sustained us. And in the end, the intelligence and value of our collection had won recognition.... I have wished every day that I might report that day’s new exciting advance to her, or the final achievement of one of her greatest desires.”<sup>10</sup>

Mary Beard’s donation of portions of the WCWA collections encouraged a collecting emphasis on international as well as United States subjects. Grierson built upon this beginning by taking regular “busman’s holidays,” during which she visited the Fawcett Library in London and women’s collections in other countries, and established contacts with women’s groups in Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Jamaica, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. The international orientation of the SSC proved useful when Grierson was able to make a “special claim” for “consideration” from potential donors. For instance, the scope of the collection was a drawing card for the niece of Ruth Woodsmall, who was convinced that her aunt’s voluminous record of international work with the YWCA and the Office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany would be suitably placed.<sup>11</sup>

Mary Beard’s vision played a crucial role in the shaping of the new collection, but the enterprise was a team effort, for without Margaret Grierson’s steady guiding presence it would not have thrived. The daily labor-intensive

curatorial duties, cajoling of donors, and the building of financial and political support were accomplished quietly and skillfully under her capable direction. With the aid of many interested alumnae, scholars, and donors, Grierson and her staff developed one of the pre-eminent repositories of primary sources for the study of women's history. By the time she retired in 1965, her successors were able to build upon a priceless collection of archival materials and the equally valuable goodwill she had cultivated among all its constituencies.

Mary Beard recognized Margaret Grierson's importance in their partnership and expressed it often in their correspondence: "What a movement proceeds to its creative purpose! Thanks to your exceptional mind and sensitivity to direction in the pioneering stage. May you live 1000 years!" Although Beard did not always agree with Grierson's ideas, she believed that the Smith archivist should be allowed to "wield the reins." Nevertheless, Beard's investment in an enterprise so near and dear meant that she was ever eager to give advice to Grierson, Herbert Davis, and his successor, Benjamin Wright. In spite of her vow "NOT TO DRIVE [Smith and Radcliffe] INTO ANY PLANS FOR STUDENT RESEARCH," her regular attempts to advocate the incorporation of women's history into the curriculum caused annoyance in some quarters. Beard was aware of her penchant for ruffling the feathers of those who presented themselves as obstacles to the zealous pursuit of her dream: "I was brash in thinking that it would be helpful for me solo to write an appeal to the Chief of the College [President Wright]. He might even stiffen some ribs...if he were punched the wrong way....Well, to keep the head sound, work on its clutch should be done by...the Alumnae, and the Friends....So don't fear that I shall do the hasty thing myself." Apparently, Wright was not aware that Beard was exercising such restraint when he penciled an exasperated note to his secretary on the latest Beard letter prodding him to institute a course in women's history at Smith: "Please acknowledge, thank her, and say I'm away. [Stop these!]"<sup>12</sup>

Margaret Grierson tried to further Beard's proposals for seminars at Smith even though she did not "deeply share Mary's ardor," and recognized that President Wright's indifference made him an unlikely convert to such a plan. She was convinced that Beard's end would not be accomplished by a head-on assault, but more quietly: "My own conviction was that my job was

to build up a fine collection of material in the field, certain that if this were well established, it would become known, and once known, would become widely used, and once of extended serious service, would forward a movement toward revision of the curriculum of women's colleges... You will understand that mine was a purely scholarly undertaking, or a preparing the way for scholars, and not in any sense 'activist.'" Mary Beard was apparently aware of her political shortcomings and understood that Grierson's methods would be more likely to prevail: "I believe with you that whether [President Wright] promotes or is inert about the Smith collection, its development will proceed and be a center, as you rightly declare, for the higher education of women."<sup>13</sup>

The Beard and Grierson team was an effective one. Mary Beard provided a conceptual framework for the SSC. Grierson used many of Beard's ideas to explain and promote the collection to the skeptical or indifferent, converting at least some of them into enthusiasts. Where Mary Beard was an activist, never hesitant to reveal her impatience with the academy's conservatism, Margaret Grierson was a more patient reformer, willing to bide her time and use her diplomatic skills to promote their joint enterprise. When some alumnae questioned the value of a collection devoted to women, Grierson was able to calm their protest by explaining that "the special collection was intended not to sharpen the distinction between sexes, but to lessen it by gathering an imposing evidence of work of women, comparable in every way with that of men."<sup>14</sup> She knew her constituents well and was able to translate Mary Beard's message into words that they could hear.

### *"The Rising Tide of Records"*

In the early years, many important gifts came from Smith alumnae, but other donors were equally significant. Grierson took full advantage of the visits to campus of Smith's honorary degree recipients and their connections to Smith alumnae. Sophie Drinker's honorary degree for her work in music "shot [her] out of purgatory to the highest heaven," according to Mary Beard. Drinker told Beard that she "had hungered to be recognized among 'intellectuals' and this recognition, she added, is her 'fulfillment'..." Drinker donated much of her source material for her book *Music and Women* to the



SSC. Dorothy Brush was instrumental in persuading her friend and associate, Margaret Sanger, to donate her personal papers. But it was always Margaret Grierson's skill at inspiring donors with the value of their papers (and their work) that carried the day and resulted in a "rising tide of records" that simultaneously overwhelmed and thrilled Grierson and her staff. "From Agnes de Mille...to Doctors Dorothy Reed Mendenhall and Florence Sabin, the variety and richness of contributions were constant and exhilarating—and beyond telling in a word."

Grierson poured a great deal of her time and energy into communicating frequently and at length with all who showed interest in the SSC through correspondence and painstakingly detailed annual reports which she distributed widely. Mary Beard wrote to her: "You have gone...about the business of educating the alumnae and others for their imperative support with such clear-headedness [and] diplomacy...that I am day by day cheering over your leadership." Carrie Chapman Catt read the fourth *Annual Report* "cover to cover," and was impressed by the collections described. That, in combination with an honorary degree from Smith College, was enough to prompt the donation of a portion of her papers.<sup>16</sup>

In one of her frequent letters to Eleanor Garrison, Grierson explained her method to her friend and donor of one of the SSC's most important collections, the Garrison Family Papers: "The dreadful [annual] report is only this morning in the hands of the printer....I certainly spent one awful month at the thing....I selected for mention most unworthy names and bits, simply in an effort to ring a bell in the pates of the uninformed. I do pray you to believe that I know better, and that this is not at all an expression of my...understanding of...historical value." The "dreadful" reports, which always included exclamations over the latest gift to the Garrison Family Papers, paid off in further donations and goodwill: "Of course I've read and re-read the Report & fluffed up with pride at all the honorable mentions. You certainly did full justice to the offerings. I can't tell you what happiness it is to me to have such a recipient....[I] marvel...at your ability to cope with the immense volume of material that flows in daily...How on earth do you do it all?"<sup>17</sup> Other donors also read the reports avidly and responded enthusiastically to mentions of their collections.

The central figures represented in the Garrison Family Papers are Ellen



Margaret Grierson at her typewriter, 1961  
so photographer unknown

Wright Garrison, daughter of Martha Coffin Wright, women's rights leader, and William Lloyd Garrison II, son of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist. Their connections to a veritable *Who's Who* of nineteenth century reformers, and their involvement in many of the reform movements of the day, generated an invaluable collection of documents. Their children, Eleanor and Frank, donated the bulk of the papers in many small and large increments from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. From the beginning,

Margaret Grierson was well aware of the treasure that was arriving regularly in manila envelopes and cardboard boxes. She did not find it "comforting" to hear that Garrison was "getting rid of hundreds of letters," but was overwhelmed and delighted by those that arrived on a regular basis. She had soon begun to work her magic on Eleanor Garrison, who was ready to "ravage the files to see if I can't unearth something else" and send it "where the reaction is not to be surpassed." Grierson responded to the "bewilderingly dazzling floods" with contrition: "I admit...my tragic flaw. I simply could not stop reading the letters as they came." As intended, none of this escaped Eleanor Garrison:

*I tore up this letter of my mother's [containing "outrageous" observations about "respected citizen" Charles Lummis whom Ellen Wright Garrison thought was a "howling bore."]. . . . Frank feels strongly that the Lummis letter should not get into the archives but it is entertaining and so like my mother I had to put it together again. . . . It gives me enormous satisfaction to fancy my mother's gratification. . . . She would have rejoiced in you because you have a seeing eye.<sup>18</sup>*

Margaret Grierson not only made it clear that she was digesting and

*The enclosed is in the thought of M.C.W.'s visit & Cousin Ruth in New York, November 1833. Remember her comment on living according to the Graham system. "*

FRIENDS OF THE SMITH COLLEGE LIBRARY

January 16th, 1954

Dearest Eleanor,

No, that letter which was on its way to you never did get off the ground. It was true that it was "on its way" and I thought that if I reported this fact, I should have to push it out. It was a near miss, as good as three thousand miles, alas! I am so distressed and disgusted that "things" get too much for my feeble wits, - but I start fresh in a fresh new year. If I were not certain of your magnanimous understanding, I should be unhappy, - and I'm not! Thank you!

I can't even remember where I left off, so long ago, but that won't matter to you, either. It is just a pleasure to me to talk aloud of the grand sores of Garrison letters that I do constantly indulge in, instead of writing prompt decent acknowledgements to the precious Garrison donors! There have been exceptionally exciting batches, this season, and quite irresistible to the "first reader" here. I am sure that I must have exclaimed visibly over the historically thrilling descriptions of Anthony-Stone feud with W.L.G.'s tribute to S.B.A., his account of her funeral, his tale of the Rev. Anna at the W.C.T.U. meeting, etc., - and of the marvelous batch from M.C.W. with news of Fanny Kemble's separation from Butler, criticism of Beecher for not meeting the accusation of Victoria Woodhull, the priceless description of the séances with the Ghost of Sumner, the difference of opinion of Martha and David on the rights of the Irish. It is moving to have such entrée into the world's history, but for myself, I get an even more stirring experience in being one of this family, hearing of the aftermath of the death of Anna Folger Coffin, the broken engagement of Marianna, more the store of Davis, etc. Your delicious notes on the "transition period of homemaking" with Dabney girls and gifted Alice Stevens, the level-headed huckleberry and stout cats on tables, etc., were of course welcome enlightenment as well as enchanting addition to the Collection. But all this wonderful whirl went on around Thanksgiving Day, and I must have written thankfully at leisure. It is the two heavenly batches that came in December that I know I have been enjoying silently.

These letters of M.C.W. are certainly incomparable. Truly, you must write about her! This gift of pen, passed on from mother to daughter to granddaughter, is unique. If one doesn't keep a keen eye on the speaker, one forgets which of you is speaking, - it is much more than any visible family likeness, and there is no one besides you three who has such spirit and wit and gaiety and sense and heart and can get it into durable expression. Quite apart from the serious light and color it sheds on social history, it is a priceless human heritage that will continue its working way, so long as it is heard. I feel that I know Auburn as well as Northampton, - the sweet apples (given to pigs, bired and quadruped), the cow who leapt the meadow fence into the orchard, the mock orange nibbled by high-tempered Eliza as well as the cow, bees swarming and off and away across the country, a broken well beam, the chill from the single chimney and fires in the dining room and wish for a neat cooking stove with copper boilers. Baby Tallman is a pet. Lucinda, humming her Vesper hymn, is an amusing trial that would lead to dreams of a good black woman who might be packed in D.'s trunk!

*Margaret Grierson to Eleanor Garrison, January 16, 1954*

appreciating the donors' treasures, she made a point of regularly sharing with them the good uses researchers were making of their gifts: "Otelia Cromwell had wonderful days here [working on her biography of Lucretia Mott] and even she, who had known the letters before, was quite overwhelmed by the richness of this collection.... I was tremendously touched by a last talk with

1620 Garden St.  
Santa Barbara  
California

January 20, 1954

Margaret dear:

What a delicious delight of a letter. Worth waiting a year for. How you ever get around to it at all is a mystery to me. I have another batch of M.C.W. to D.W. 1855 - 59 all but ready to send along. With this I think I shall send three letters from David. Two concerning Marianna's engagement to Rodman Wharton. She tried with might and main to love him but her cousin Tom Mott was firmly entrenched and when the women folk found that out they ceased to try to hold her to it. Rodman's deportment seems to have been perfect. One of the letters said that Grandma Coffin gave Marianna the notion that she was only a step-child to encourage her to decide in Rodman's favor but you see how pained and horrified David was at that idea.

Then there are two letters concerning Grandma Coffin's death. Both show David in a kindly light. He has been portrayed as something of a kermudgeon in the family annals and I am constantly surprised at the virtue I find in him. And I always thought that he was considered a poor substitute for Peter Pelham but it does n't sound that way at all.

I believe that Grandma Coffin was much like Martha, she is spoken of with high regard and affection, but she slipped a little when she meddled, if I may say so, in this affair.

I am interested in the Graham history. The name is often on my lips as I miss graham bread more than I can tell. It has gone along with the doctor of whom I never heard. I forgot that Martha was affected by him .

There are lots more letters from David. Frank says he did away with a lot of them in the early days thinking they were rather dull. I guess enough are left. Sarah, his sister, married Nathaniel Kniffin. I found out his Christian name only tonight. Always "Mr. Kinffin". Sarah died in

*Eleanor Garrison to Margaret Grierson, January 20, 1954*

her, telling how she came to start this book and what Mrs. Mott had meant in her life." Grierson's genius for building rapport in letters elicited replies from Eleanor Garrison so lively and descriptive that they augment the documents she donated: "Aunt Lidy [Eliza Wright Osborne] loved all the suffragists and put them up royally. Anna Shaw, S.B.A., Mrs. Stanton and the

Millers and Emily Howland. She had Harriet May Mills in London with her when we were there in 1910. Harriet was one of the younger campaigners..., a nice 'girl' and full of zeal, but...Oswald V[illard] remarked that if she kept the leadership of New York State we shouldn't get suffrage 'till Hell's froze over.' It took Mrs. Catt to make things hum...." Not all donors had stories to tell like Eleanor's, or her lively style, but most were willing to give what they had once Margaret Grierson had won them over. Agnes de Mille, who donated portions of her papers beginning in 1959, told Grierson: "[Y]ou make me feel like Mme. de Sevigne,...as though I wanted to send you everything, including my teeth."<sup>19</sup>

The donation of the Margaret Sanger Papers, which formed the basis for the SSC's subsequent collecting focus on the history of birth control and reproductive rights, provides a good example of Margaret Grierson's skillful handling of all the parties involved. Florence Rose, Sanger's assistant, reminded Sanger that she had promised Mary Beard some of her personal papers for the WCWA, and that the Sophia Smith Collection was, in a sense, the inheritor of the Archives' mission. Following a visit by Margaret Sanger to the SSC in 1946, Dorothy Brush expressed her concern that the Sanger Papers might be lost to another repository: "[Margaret Sanger] is sure our president...is pro-Catholic because she says he took occasion to admire the Catholics three different times to her....She does not believe he will ask for her material and I do not think she will give it now, unless he, personally does this. Personally, I think he probably doesn't have much of an idea as to just who she is anyhow or he wouldn't have been so tactless....I think it would be an awful blot on our escutcheon if we let this slip through our fingers now!" Grierson was not only left with the task of repairing the damage caused by the President's tactlessness, but according to Dorothy Brush, she also needed to compensate for the negative impression made by the College Librarian:

*...I am sure [Margaret Sanger] shocked the librarian! That however does not distress me—I think it would do her lots of good to be shocked right out of the library! Margaret is a universal person, a citizen of the world, and at home all over the world and in all sorts of society. For that reason she sometimes forgets that other people have not been so privileged! I admit I was a bit shocked by the story she told myself—but chiefly for fear of its affect [sic] on whatever her*

*name is...I really am worried and rather wish I hadn't brought her up there. She fell in love with you, as I am sure everyone must,...but not with Prexy or the custodian of the books!*

Margaret Grierson pulled the fat out of the fire by securing a follow-up letter to Sanger from President Davis and writing one of her own that was typically warm and ego-boosting. Sanger replied with a promise to deposit some of her papers, thanking Grierson for her “utter kindness and dearness in making my visit there such a happy one.” Dorothy Brush was certain that “none of this would ever have happened” without Margaret Grierson’s “inspirational writings.”<sup>20</sup>

Margaret Sanger and Eleanor Garrison were not the only donors won over by Margaret Grierson’s personal attentions. The litany of grateful effusions in response to her enthusiastic and detailed letters enumerating the wonders of the donor’s papers is constant during her more than twenty years at the helm of the SSC. She became such good friends with many of her donor correspondents that the ties remained unbroken well into her retirement. Mary Byers Smith, donor of portions of the New England Hospital Records, wrote Grierson: “Mrs. G. [Edith Garrison] told me that your letters to Eleanor G.[arrison] kept her alive!! I can say the same!” Alice Morgan Wright, sculptor, suffragist, and animal rights activist, warned that “if [Margaret] keeps on with those ‘heavenly letters’ she is probably going to need not only another building but another campus.” Perhaps writer Nancy Hale, the donor of her own and the Hale Family Papers, best expressed what it was like to receive one of Margaret Grierson’s little works of art in the mail: “Your letter of February 12th was one of your very best—warm and moving and embracing—I wish you lived with me all the time so that I would feel the way I feel when I read your letters, all the time, presumably! I really don’t know how you do it because actually you are not an effusive person but your letters, while not effusive, are warmer than springtime. They are just lovely, the way my garden is now.”<sup>21</sup>

Donors continued to give books to the SSC, but increasingly the gifts arrived in the form of manuscripts, personal papers, records of organizations, and ephemeral publications unlikely to be preserved in general libraries. As the collection became more unique and grew in importance it began to draw

increased attention. Smith College faculty were beginning to incorporate its material into their classes, and scholars and authors from around the country were requesting information, copies, and photographs. By 1954, a large number of students were writing honors theses and term papers using the collections, and several scholarly works researched in the SSC were published. Seven years later, historians and other researchers came to the SSC “from Harvard to the University of California, Chicago to Texas, and from Canada, England, The Netherlands, India, [and] Australia...” to use the collection.<sup>22</sup>

The amount of work involved in building a new collection and the next president’s lack of interest in the enterprise were daunting, but there was also a sense of excitement that inspired the small staff. In a tribute to her long-time assistant and friend, Elizabeth Duvall, Margaret Grierson described the atmosphere: “[S]he and I became associates in adventure, sailing still largely uncharted seas....If our ‘work’ absorbed our lives in those happy years, there was plenty of social pleasure and fun in it. We were constantly entertaining our distinguished donors and supporters, research workers and interested inquiring visitors....”<sup>23</sup> Grierson, as appreciative of her staff as she was the donors, did not hesitate to share credit for the growth and development of the SSC with Duvall and other staff members who devoted themselves to its success.

Though Grierson’s success encouraged her, it simultaneously threatened to overwhelm the staff and the space available to the collection. She confided to Eleanor Garrison that “the daily mails, gifts, visitors keep up a crazy pace,” and that she felt “like those acrobats who keep a row of plates spinning on the top of poles.” Alice Morgan Wright wrote to Margaret Grierson in 1957: “I’m sorry for all the summer days you have to spend on your library work though I expect it is your own fault for having made such a success of it.” At regular intervals, Grierson struggled to get the college administration to recognize the SSC’s growing importance and consequent need for increased financial support. Early in President Wright’s tenure, it became apparent that he had qualms about the place of the SSC in an undergraduate institution: “President Wright has expressed the belief that [Smith College’s] library should...not [be] a research library....He is in a tizzy about the finances of old Smith....All privately endowed colleges have the jitters....I am sure that the only reason that he does not at once see in [the

SSC] an object of 'justifiable' support, is that he fears its expense and still goes on the broad line that we should not afford material of such quality."<sup>24</sup>

A new administration brought with it an attitude more hospitable to the support of the SSC. President Thomas C. Mendenhall was its firm backer, as well as the donor of a valuable collection, the papers of his mother, Dorothy Reed Mendenhall. Even so, obstacles remained to be overcome, and it was Grierson who was ultimately responsible for the Collection's well-being:

*I loathe a fight, and I am very poor at it, but that is just what I am engaged in. My last act, before our President took off for his summer holiday in England, was to get him an...estimate of probable annual expansion. It shows that the present planning for the new [James Mandly Hills] Wing will give the Archives only a few feet more than it already uses, and will give the Sophia Smith Collection actually less footage....I trust that these facts and figures will percolate during the summer, and that there will be a revision of plans in the fall.... [T]his whole business has taken endless precious time and is so distasteful to me that I am frantic. However, I just can't refuse to carry on the good fight, at whatever expense to my beloved job. I am retiring soon,...and I cannot leave without doing everything within my feeble powers to make assured the future of these enterprises to which I have devoted twenty years, and which are so dear to my heart and so incomparably valuable to the College.*

Grierson's "good fight" was unsuccessful in this instance and she had to make do with the inadequate space. Nevertheless, by 1961 plans were being made for the Sophia Smith Collection and the Smith College Archives to move to new quarters within Neilson Library, the James Mandly Hills Wing, presented by Helen Hills Hills, a "generous friend" of the two collections.<sup>25</sup>

### *"I Was Around...for the Planting of an Acorn"*

In 1965, upon her retirement, the Friends of the Smith College Library created The Margaret Storrs Grierson Endowed Fund for the maintenance and development of the Sophia Smith Collection and the College Archives. Three years later, Grierson was awarded the Smith College Medal. In her twenty-three years of building and strengthening the SSC, much had changed.



October 1<sup>st</sup> Monday

- Letters in: R. Ford. Offer De Cesteren book. Lake Worth. Florida
- x P. Dodson. U. Archives. meeting of Soc of Am. Archivists
- E. Flexner. Here Oct 8<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup>.
- N. Cushman. Mary Philips & woman's. Archive at Cornell, etc.
- E. Garrison. Santa Barbara. & cold. notes on gifts.
- N. Q. Engel. Letter w gift. J. Whitney or Bea Smith could identify.

Gifts: Letters, photos, misc. 2 letters, MS poem. God-H&M CW. MS VLG etc.

- Snap shot of Amherst war mem.
- Clips & letters (Hambiel, Hobile... E. Sheldon etc)
- Texts of 1920 Rally sketch
- News of Pop & S.C.
- Photos of Seelye. Burton. Davis of Davis Center from book

E. Garrison's  
E. Flexner.  
N. Cushman  
N. Q. Engel  
D. Brush.  
Mrs. Christie  
R. R. Mack.

Letters out:

- R. P. R. agree & use a Seaver book for incoming exhibit
- Down & look up Seaver & Darbons. decide against it.
- Check Order book for Book sale 1955-6 - was zone?
- Sis Kuhlthau post up Council exhibit.
- Dr. Tricker call on T. Q. Edge.
- H. Hamlin over & collect Great Aunt Eliza's samples
- Mrs. Christie called, with gifts, & get up history of Davis Center.
- Struggle w. annual financial report !!
- T. Q. Edge first thought on Archives files.
- Met N. Rumpstein - will be in on 4<sup>th</sup> & see our Grimké.
- Irving Crosby dines, eve & night.

A page from one of Margaret Grierson's daybooks, 1956

President Thomas C. Mendenhall did not hesitate to claim, in awarding the Medal, that Smith, "as an institution which for almost a century has played its part in the emancipation of women through education,...proudly supports this collection of their achievement and aspirations which you in fact have founded." Her years of patient effort had put the Sophia Smith Collection on a solid footing, making a great contribution to women's history scholarship.<sup>26</sup>

Eleanor Flexner, author of *Century of Struggle*, wrote the following advice to social reformer Mary van Kleeck in 1956: "My book comes on apace,

and would come on a good deal better and faster if the suffrage ladies had any respect for history and had not either a) self-censored their correspondence, or b) scattered it to the four winds. Please be advised that you will do your future biographer...a kindness if you will take steps to ensconce your papers in some nice, well-managed, warm, clean, fire-proof spot like the Radcliffe Archives or the Sophia Smith Collection....” It was thanks to the dedication of women like Grierson that Flexner was able to refer van Kleeck to the SSC, which acquired her papers beginning in 1956. Van Kleeck had been “overwhelmed by [Grierson’s] appreciation of the possible value” of her archives:

*Memoirs are personal in essence, and in my observation hardly more than short-lived in interest at best.... To write about [national issues] with merely me as the unifying element would belittle them to the vanishing point.... Now, at last, as I have worked on materials to be sent... and especially, as I have received your enlightening and creative response, the concept has emerged that the collection itself, if properly arranged, would be the most useful biography.... That you should have understood this so clearly, and with such enthusiasm, is to me a wonder....<sup>27</sup>*

Grierson was able to empathize with a donor like van Kleeck and so many other women of van Kleeck’s generation, who acknowledged the importance of documenting their work, but jealously guarded the privacy of their personal lives. At the same time she was flexible enough to encourage a donor like Margaret Sanger, who was ahead of her time in embracing a more modern conception of the interrelationship between the personal and the public sides of her life and how each illuminated the other.

Margaret Grierson knew how to get the best her donors had to offer, and as a consequence, two decades later, when van Kleeck’s biographer finally appeared, he found a voluminous and well organized record of her work waiting for him. Similarly, the many scholars who turned to the pursuit of women’s history and women’s studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s found a wide variety of source materials at their fingertips because of the prescience and hard work of Mary Beard, Margaret Grierson, and the others of their generation who were the pioneering advocates of scholarship in women’s history.

• Notes

1. Acting President Elizabeth Cutter Morrow, formally established the College Archives in 1940, although it had existed as the "Historical Collection" under the stewardship of Nina Browne, class of 1882, since 1921. Margaret Grierson signed a March 4, 1959 letter to President Thomas C. Mendenhall with all three of her titles, adding in parentheses, "A three-ring circus, and the most exciting job at Smith College!" (Margaret Storrs Grierson (MSG) to Thomas C. Mendenhall, March 4, 1959, President's Office Records, 1959-75, Smith College Archives, Smith College (SCA)).
2. MSG to Nina Browne, April 8, 1943, Margaret Storrs Grierson Papers, SCA; MSG quoted in "Imposing Evidence," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Vol. LXXV, No. 2 (Winter 1984), 3.
3. MSG, "Woman's Collection" (report written for Friends of the Smith College Library member Frances Carpenter Huntington), October 1943, Sophia Smith Collection History File, SCA.
4. MSG to Dorothy Brush, July 10, 1946, Dorothy Brush Papers Donor File, SCA.
5. MSG quoted in "Imposing Evidence," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, 4.
6. Mary Ritter Beard to MSG, June 24, 1943, Mary Beard Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College (SSC).
7. Nancy F. Cott, ed., *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 62; MRB, "After Equality—What?," quoted in Cott, 38; MRB to MSG, November 1, 1949, Beard Papers, SSC; MRB quoted in Ann J. Lane, ed., *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook* (New York: Schocken, 1977), 56.
8. Frederick L. Allen to MRB, November 29, 1949, Beard Papers, SSC; MRB to MSG and Marine Leland, August, 25, [1950], Beard Papers, SSC.
9. Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 47.
10. MSG to William Beard, draft letter, [1959] in Mary Beard Papers Donor File, SCA; Herbert Davis, "Friends of the Library," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, February, 1942, 96.
11. MSG to Marlen Eldredge Neumann, June 17, 1963, Ruth Woodsmall Papers Donor File, SCA.
12. MRB to MSG, June 22, 1944 and March 25, 1951, Beard Papers, SSC; MRB to Eva Hansl, August 11, 1944, carbon copy in Beard Papers, SSC; MRB to Benjamin Wright, April 4, 1954, President's Office Records, 1949-59, SCA.
13. MSG to Barbara K. Turoff, October 16, 1979, Beard Papers Donor File, SCA; MRB to MSG, February 17, 1951, Beard Papers, SSC.
14. "Imposing Evidence," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, 2.
15. MSG, "A Tribute to Elizabeth S. Duvall," [1982?], Elizabeth Duvall Staff File, SCA; MRB to Dorothy Brush, June 29, 1949, Beard Papers, SSC; "Imposing Evidence," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, 4.
16. MRB to MSG, March 4, 1951, Beard Papers, SSC; Carrie Chapman Catt to MSG, June 14, 1946, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, SSC.
17. MSG to Eleanor Garrison, February 1, 1951 and EG to MSG, March 19, 1950, Garrison Family Papers, SSC.

18. *MSG to EG, May 22, 1948 and March 8, 1951; EG to MSG, September 5, 1948 and February 5, 1950, Garrison Family Papers, SSC.*
19. *MSG to EG, April 12, 1950 and EG to MSG, July 6, 1955, Garrison Family Papers, SSC; Agnes de Mille to MSG, December 5, 1963, Agnes de Mille Papers Donor File, SCA.*
20. *Florence Rose to Margaret Sanger, June 17, 1946, Florence Rose Papers, SSC; Dorothy Dick [Brush] to MSG, July 8 and 16, 1946, Dorothy Brush Papers, SSC; MS to MSG, July 10 1946, Margaret Sanger Papers Donor File, SCA.*
21. *Mary Byers Smith to MSG, April 29, 1963, Mary Byers Smith Donor File, SCA; Alice Morgan Wright to Marine Leland, March 18, 1957, Alice Morgan Wright Papers, SSC; Nancy Hale Bowers to MSG, March 20, 1985, Grierson Papers, SCA.*
22. *Friends of the Smith College Library, Annual Report (Eighth, January 1950; Twelfth, September 1954; Nineteenth, July 1961), SCA.*
23. *MSG, "A Tribute to Elizabeth S. Duvall," Duvall Staff File, SCA.*
24. *MSG to EG, December 3, 1950 and August 16, 1958, Garrison Family Papers, SSC; AMW to MG, August 31, 1957, Alice Morgan Wright Papers, SSC.*
25. *MSG to EG, July, 24 1960, Garrison Family Papers, SSC; MSG to Amy Hague, June 11, 1995; Friends of the Smith College Library, Annual Report (Nineteenth, July 1961), SCA.*
26. *"I was around only for the beginning; for the planting of an acorn. The greatest satisfaction is to see it go on developing, growing in ways beyond my ken, into a staunch oak tree." (MSG to Amy Hague, September 17, 1992); Thomas C. Mendenhall, Smith College Medal Citation, October 23, 1968, Grierson Papers, SCA.*
27. *Eleanor Flexner to Mary van Kleeck, January 24, 1956, Mary van Kleeck Papers, SSC; MvK to MSG, December 10, 1957, Mary van Kleeck Papers Donor File, SCA.*

## INTRODUCTION OF NANCY F. COTT

*Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*

✿ Nancy F. Cott, one of the country's leading historians, holds the position of Stanley Woodward Professor of American Studies and History at Yale University, where she has taught since 1974. She went to Cornell and then to Brandeis University, where she got her M.A. and her Ph.D. in 1974. She is the author of important works on American history. In 1977 she published *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, a landmark study. She followed this with *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, which has offered an important reinterpretation of twentieth-century women's history. More recently she has published *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard through Her Letters*. The works she has edited are no less important: a set of documents, *Root of Bitterness*, and an important collection of articles, *A Heritage of Her Own*, with Elizabeth Pleck. Through her books, articles, reviews, lectures, and participation as editor on many historical journals, she is one of those who have shaped the way we think and write about women in United States history.

“ENLIGHTENMENT RESPECTING HALF THE HUMAN RACE”:  
MARY RITTER BEARD AND WOMEN’S HISTORY

*Nancy F. Cott*

✿ Mary Ritter Beard’s moon rose in the shadow of her husband’s sun and was entirely eclipsed by his fading glory. Charles A. Beard is generally acknowledged to have been the most important male historian in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. A female reviewer of their last jointly authored work granted that “Mary Beard holds the same rank among women historians,” but that gender indication made all the difference. The post-World War II historians who kept the memory of Charles Beard alive by intense efforts to demolish his work did not pay the same attention to her. If Charles Beard’s reputation stands, as Richard Hofstadter once put it, “like an imposing ruin on the landscape of American historiography,” Mary Beard’s is only a mention on the plaque fixed to one side.<sup>1</sup> She who spent the better part of her life passionately committed to proving the utility of history and to recovering women’s history is barely known, even to many historians of women.

Why is this? First, in part because of Mary Beard’s own failings. Her published writing was loose-jointed, oddly organized, her prose frequently turgid or florid, her references sometimes obscure. Although she composed some memorable lines, her prose on the whole was not gripping and sometimes not accessible. The important thing, as she asserted in a 1929 review, was to have “something to say,” and that she did, but she often left the reader by the wayside.

Second, she was purposely and in a principled way scornful of academic or other institutional affiliation. She earned no degrees beyond a bachelor’s and accepted no honorary ones; she had no employment but as a writer and invited lecturer; she had no audience but the public. All these conditions had their advantages but also their disadvantages as far as the continuity of her reputation was concerned.

Third, in her pioneering writings and efforts on behalf of women’s history she set herself at odds with those who would have formed her likeliest constituency—feminists—because she differed from the feminist ideology of

equal rights and disputed the feminist assertion that women had been subjected to male domination throughout history.

In that popularly understood way that academic historians are not supposed to admit as valid explanation, her major concerns and accomplishments were ahead of their time. Neither the academy nor general readers—even female readers—in the 1930s were ready to hear or willing to accept her message that the frames of written history had to be widened to encompass women’s doings as well as men’s. If Mary Beard’s coauthorship with her husband merits more attention than it has been given, it is her creativity in women’s history that most distinguished her and also set her apart from her contemporaries. Given the boost of a vibrant women’s movement and a diversified scene of higher education, women’s history has developed in the last two decades into a recognized field, but neither of these contexts welcomed Mary Ritter Beard’s ventures.

Also, Beard’s relationship to her husband proved a double-edged sword. In the world of publishing and lecturing she had the advantage of association with him during his lifetime. Their joint production, *The Rise of American Civilization* (the work which “did more,” in Hofstadter’s estimation, “than any other such book of the twentieth century to define American history for the reading public”), came out in 1927, when Charles Beard was already very well known as a social critic and intellectual. He had established his presence through journalistic writing, reform activism, and controversial books (especially *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*). It is undisputed that “not only as an historian but also as a political scientist and educator, Charles A. Beard was one of the most influential social thinkers in the United States from about 1912 to 1941.”<sup>2</sup>

As his collaborator on *The Rise...* and its sequels, Mary Beard achieved much greater public prominence than she gained herself as a suffragist, reformer, or author. She rode his coattails into the limelight but hovered on the periphery of that limelight even at its brightest. While Charles was alive, Mary got inadequate recognition for her contribution to their jointly authored work, especially from male historians. Harold Faulkner and Merle Curti invited Charles Beard to speak to their history students and colleagues here at Smith in the mid-1930s, for example, and never gave a thought to inviting his female coauthor until word got out that she had accompanied him



Mary Beard at her desk, 1954 • photographer unknown

to Northampton. After Charles Beard's death in 1948, scholars—beginning with Perry Miller in an obituary in the *Nation*—read Mary Beard out of the record, calling *The Rise of American Civilization*, for example, “his” masterpiece and “his” greatest work. Howard K. Beale’s striking non sequitur on the Beards’ coauthorship appears as the normative thinking of male historians of the postwar generation: “no one knows the nature of their collaboration.... Hence, I have always spoken of the joint works as Charles Beard’s.”<sup>3</sup>

True enough, Mary Beard herself was never forthcoming to historians aiming to assess her husband’s work or influence and usually diminished her own part. To Merle Curti she wrote self-deprecatingly in 1938, shortly before the couple’s *America in Midpassage*, sequel to *The Rise...*, was to appear, “I try to help CAB escape the burden of carrying me for his is so much a personality alone. I would not allow my name to be placed on our coauthorship if I could prevent it because the major contribution is his.” And why could she not prevent it? Because, as Charles Beard told Curti, they worked in “equal” partnership and he insisted that fact must be acknowledged.<sup>4</sup>

Reader, it almost seemed, to take criticism (though she bristled at it) than praise, Mary Beard exhibited a lifelong ambivalence—on the one hand intensely sure that her reading of history was accurate and all-important, on



the other hand ready to call herself “insane,” “the worst person” possible to launch a project on women in history, “a lowbrow.” No doubt her constant companionship with the celebrated and enormously productive Charles Beard—her knowledge that she was his crucial collaborator and her simultaneous sense that she was not viewed as his equal—contributed mightily to her unstable self-image.

In a double boomerang, Mary Beard shared the ignominy and scorn that descended upon Charles Beard when his foreign policy views diverged from the liberal mainstream. Although forcefully antifascist, he opposed Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s internationalism and the entry of the United States into World War II. He wrote several books criticizing FDR’s road to war without Mary Beard’s collaboration, but her letters show that she shared his view of America’s place in world politics. The political attacks on his dissent from FDR’s conduct of diplomacy and war demoralized Mary Beard too. She wrote to Margaret Grierson, who was promoting women’s archives at Smith in 1944 and wanted her sponsorship, “As for my name as a value, of course you are welcome to use it, though I doubt whether it has the pull you think it has. The name ‘Beard’ is anathema in many quarters, I assure you, whether Charles or Mary is prefixed to it.”<sup>5</sup> What had been her advantage in association with Charles Beard became her burden in the postwar environment. After his death the onslaught against him by the postwar generation of historians more easily buried Mary Beard.

Yet she deserves to be better known to history. She spent much of her life trying to prove the utility of history, especially by recovering women’s past. Her passion to count women in animated all her books, including the ones written with Charles Beard. Unlike most feminists of her generation, however, she doubted that “equal rights” was the way to advance women. In fact, she was convinced that sexual “equality” was a deficient goal for women if it meant simply measuring up to a male norm.

I am not going to talk about Beard’s young adult life—her college experience at DePauw University in the 1890s, where she met Charles Beard, their marriage and sojourn in England at the turn of the century, where they were both influenced by cooperative socialists and Mary became a devoted friend of Emmeline Pankhurst, their return to New York and her absorption in municipal and labor reform and her emergence as a militant campaigner

for woman suffrage. I will skip, too, her earliest writings, and move on to her views of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, the decades that led up to the founding of the Sophia Smith Collection. Suffice it to say that in her very first essay in print, published exactly at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, she noted, "The volumes which record the history of the human race are filled with the deeds and the words of great men...but the Twentieth Century Woman...questions the completeness of the story."<sup>6</sup> From this point until her last she focused on history and its meaning for contemporary women, although for the period of the 1910s it is her activism on behalf of woman suffrage that has evoked most notice.<sup>7</sup>

The years following the achievement of woman suffrage in 1920 proved a turning point in Beard's thinking, as it did for many contemporaries. She was already in her early forties. What was significant for her was not only the Nineteenth Amendment but World War I and its aftermath, which led her to revise her views of the goal of sex equality. Even during the suffrage battle she had never singled out the goal of women's rights, seeing that aim as part of a larger vision of social justice. But a trip to postwar Europe in 1920-21 affected her greatly, leaving her more impressed than ever with the paltriness and futility of articulating a goal of sex equality apart from wider aims of social renovation. The trip stirred an antiwar spirit in her that thereafter suffused all her thinking. If, from then on, making women equal to men was not an appealing goal to her, that was because she saw conscription of women for war as its logical outcome.

During her trip to Britain, France, and Italy, Beard saw "women sweep[ing] the streets and till[ing] the land while men drink in the cafés." These observations precipitated her new conviction that women had been occupied in "the world's work" all along, and there was nothing glamorous about it. Although influenced by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist arguments at the turn of the century, Beard here denied Gilman's main contention, that women had been excluded from meaningful and productive work in the world, work like men's. Beard also set aside Gilman's assumption that what men had was worth women's striving for. She burst out in a letter to a former suffragist friend who was urging her to think about an equal rights amendment, "Half the goals [men] set are ridiculous and [women's] pure imitation is both infantile and unintelligent. Aha!"<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, Beard was more publicly critical of what she called “the feminist progression—that large measure of civil and political equality actually established after the long era in which it had been only a dream.” She wrote in a magazine article, “What is this equal opportunity in fact and in import? Is it the mere chance to prove fitness and adaptability to a tooth-and-claw economic struggle,...or does it signify the power to lead as well as follow?”<sup>9</sup>

As the Great Depression broke, her mood was cantankerous indeed; she found “pure imitation” of men utterly inadequate; she blamed women who emulated men for failing to foresee that by coveting equality only, they would attain “equality in disaster.” Yet her outlook was more hortatory than defeatist: she chastised her female contemporaries because she felt they were capable of better things if they turned their minds from imitating men to conceiving original schemes for national economic and social recovery. In her view, equality was not an adequate goal for women because the world at risk needed women to offer something different and better, more socially constructive, than men (who made war) had typically provided.

These political convictions animated her history writing. In the late 1920s, picking up clues left by late-Victorian anthropologists and Robert Briffault’s *The Mothers*, which emphasized the female origins of agriculture and the useful arts, Beard began to rewrite the long past around the theme of women’s role in forming civilization. In her first major work of women’s history, *On Understanding Women*, published in 1931, Beard explicitly theorized her historical approach, contending that in order to include women “the narrative of history must be reopened, must be widened to take in the whole course of civilization as well as war, politics, gossip, and economics.” *On Understanding Women* amounted to a revisionist, woman-centered outline of European civilization, with some excursions to consider Oriental, Indian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian examples too. It focused on the high points of the standard history (the Greeks, the Romans, the feudal and medieval periods, enlightened and imperial Europe), finding in each setting female personalities and activities central to social and political life and the civilizing process.<sup>10</sup>

Beard’s evolving historical views and social criticism rested on the premise that feminists in her generation had succeeded spectacularly in their

immediate goals. Not only had they won the vote: American women had raced through the doors of opportunity that feminists had flung open. They had attained “important political offices, novel business positions, unexampled wages and salaries, educational influence, laboratory advantages, scientific training, honorary degrees, prizes of many sorts, rare chances to explore the earth by land, sea, or air, and international recognition.” In her words, they had taken “the capitalist economy at face value—the value assigned it by men” and then achieved, individually.<sup>11</sup>

Beard, however, found individualism a deficient social value or social agenda. In fact both Beards had long been critics of economic and philosophic individualism and of laissez-faire premises. Now, during the economic crisis, Beard identified feminism with individualism. Her critique of individualism was directed not simply against laissez-faire but against the sufficiency of the male model for female aspiration. Beard more than ever stressed that equality—if it meant aping men’s ways, as she felt it had—was a spurious and world-threatening goal. “Equality with a spoliator of the nation’s resources in commodities or life is a dead aim, whatever the exigencies may be of earning a livelihood; whatever the glories of a limelight fame,” she wrote. “The opportunity to rise in professions, if they remain anti-social or plain stupid in their outlook, is of no importance from the standpoint of a progressive society or State.... Fixing the mind on man in an effort to pursue his course to the neglect of a consciousness of humanity in the large is a weakness—not a strength—in woman.”<sup>12</sup>

Beard’s most profound and seemingly most heartfelt criticism focused on women’s adoption of men’s view of knowledge and education. In contrast to her own efforts to change the male-centered reading of the history of civilization, she judged that women’s presence in the academy had generally meant more of the same. Even worse, university-trained women absorbed and manifested typically male views of men’s leadership and importance in society and culture. She had hoped and assumed that education would equip women to exercise their particular genius at social construction and cohesion. Now, she realized, women’s education in “the men’s curriculum” might have the opposite result. The rise of fascism in Italy and Germany goaded her sensitivity to the possibilities and consequences of mental indoctrination. Her pessimism about women’s indoctrination to men’s views in the universities

and professions was virtually unique in the United States in this period.

During the early New Deal, Beard was looking for women's leadership in social reconstruction, in values alternative to the ones that had brought economic crash and fascism. She found in history a continuous exertion of social leadership by women, and she rejected outright the assumption that men had subjected women to their own will and domination in the long past. By the mid-1930s, she moved from challenging women's adoption of men's ways to expressing a moderate optimism that the world economic and political crisis would shock feminists into a more "cosmic" awareness. All her historical findings—and her five years of work to establish a World Center for Women's Archives—were aimed toward rousing her contemporaries to reenact anew what she believed to be their historically documented role of creative social leadership.

In her most optimistic vision, she imagined that "rugged feminism" (as she called it in obvious parallel to nineteenth-century "rugged individualism") would retreat, and a new feminism emerge. This new feminism would "be less imitative than the old, more constructive and less acquisitive (therefore destructive), indicative of feminine concern with political economy as a whole as the old feminism was not." In a manifesto she wrote for a 1933 international congress, she proclaimed "it is against social systems, not men, that we launch our second woman movement." A vision of integrating women's struggle for gender justice with a "demand for decency of life and labor all around" animated Beard's politics during the 1930s.<sup>13</sup>

She continued to think that feminists, rather than training their eyes solely on sex discrimination, ought to think more inclusively. She herself consistently took an integrative approach to society and to history, refusing to isolate the woman question from challenges facing society as a whole. Her history writing began from the premise that "Everything is related to everything else," that it was essential to see "interplay of government, politics, economics, modes of living and working, schools of thought, religion, power, class, society and family, the arts and ambition, and the biological and cultural aspects of sex." With this approach her focus on women was not inconsistent but consistent, because (in her words) the "whole social fabric" was not woven without women's strands. Once responding to a friend's criticism of her "obsession with women," Beard defended herself, "but the work I have

done in studying women made me aware of large social corollaries as I should not otherwise be.”<sup>14</sup>

During the New Deal years, basking in the spectacular success of *The Rise of American Civilization* [1927], both Beards reached the height of their public influence. Mary Beard was one of the “leading feminists” of the year 1936, in the judgment of the *New York Sun*, and was also the only intellectual among the dozen organizational leaders and professionals named as possible female president of the United States in a widely publicized piece in *Pictorial Review*.

In the crisis of the 1930s, Beard was looking for a common consciousness among women that was not a sense of subjection or victimization. She was hoping for a shared vision among women that would lead not toward individualism but toward a movement for distributive justice of the most inclusive sort. A unique vehicle for this appeared when Hungarian-born feminist-pacifist Rosika Schwimmer came to Beard with the idea of creating an archive in which the documents of women active in the suffrage and peace movements of the early twentieth century would be preserved. As Beard initially saw the plan, it represented a “way to recapture the imaginative zest of women for public life.”<sup>15</sup>

Under Beard’s leadership this became a five-year effort, involving dozens of donors and sponsors, to establish a World Center for Women’s Archives—women’s archives of all sorts, far beyond Schwimmer’s specific agenda. During the years that she led this project she displayed marvelous creative talents in excavating women’s documents from basements and attics; creating historical documents through oral interviews; identifying, cataloging and maintaining known records of women’s history; cajoling donors of papers and sponsors who might offer names or funds. She conceived of the project not as antiquarian or purely curatorial but as a political venture, a meeting place for women of many minds, the source for an educational revolution, and the site from which women’s public protests and social leadership might emanate. And inspiring the whole endeavor was Beard’s belief that women needed their history. “Papers. Records. These we must have. Without documents no history. Without history no memory. Without memory no greatness. Without greatness no development among women,” she wrote to the Howard University archivist she had enlisted to submit African-American

women's papers.<sup>16</sup> Although ultimately unsuccessful (it was beset by infighting, troubled by racism in some localities, and hampered by lack of money), this project was the direct progenitor of the Sophia Smith Collection and the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe, both founded in the early 1940s.

Beard found an ally, a friend, and avid correspondent in Margaret Grierson, the Smith College archivist. In 1941 Herbert Davis, President of Smith, a scholar of English literature, had proposed to the college alumnae to build a rare book and manuscript collection on women writers. The idea of the Sophia Smith Collection was adopted by the alumnae and soon took a historical turn, probably because of Grierson. Some important documents remaining in the World Center for Women's Archives collections came to Smith. Grierson welcomed not only Beard's suggestions about collecting but also her vision of courses and seminars in women's history to be attached to the archives. The historians on the Smith faculty were not receptive, however, according to Beard's reading. "I am not surprised that you have found the historians reluctant to fall into line," she wrote to Grierson. "I took that as a 'natural,'" she continued sardonically, "since they have no knowledge for handling [women's history] and consequently assume that there is nothing in it. You'll be able to move them as Charles said his father moved balky mules—by building a fire under them."<sup>17</sup>

When Beard, in 1950, summarized her life project to an old friend, she put it this way: "What I have been trying to do for years is to awaken women to the reality of their historic power...to incite women to realize who and what they have been, with a view to their realizing better who they are and what they are now doing."<sup>18</sup> Beard always saw women's history as political. To reclaim women's history was to find the self-knowledge that would enable women to seize social leadership. We owe a debt to Mary Beard for her affirmation of women's agency in creating their own history and for her experimental vision that history looks different through women's eyes. Her deep-dyed conviction that women need their history in order to change their future is a most appealing part of her legacy.

50 Notes

1. Adrienne Koch, review of *Beard and Beard, A Basic History of the United States*, New York Times Book Review, Aug. 6, 1944, 1; Richard Hofstadter, The Progressive Historians (New York: 1968), 344.
2. Hofstadter, Progressive Historians, 299; John Higham, "Charles A. Beard: A Sketch," in Writing American History (Bloomington: 1970), 131.
3. Merle Curti to Nancy F. Cott, Nov. 3, 1988, in author's possession. (Mary Beard did not accept the belated invitation to campus, on the grounds that the event was her husband's.) Perry Miller, "Charles A. Beard," The Nation, Sept. 25, 1948; Higham, "CAB: A Sketch," 131; Howard K. Beale, Charles A. Beard: An Appraisal (Lexington, Ky.: 1954), 300 n44.
4. MRB to Curti, May 24, 1938, Curti Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society; Curti to Nancy F. Cott, Nov. 3, 1988.
5. MRB to Margaret Grierson, Mar. 6, 1944, Beard Papers, Sophia Smith Collection. For MRB's views on internationalism, see MRB to Mira Saunders, June 29, 1939, in Nancy F. Cott, A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard through Her Letters (New Haven: 1991) 190-93.
6. MRB, "The Twentieth-Century Woman Looking Around and Backward," Young Oxford, vol. 3, no. 15 (Dec. 1900), 100-101.
7. MRB, "The Twentieth-Century Woman Looking Around and Backward," Young Oxford, 100. For MRB's youth and suffrage activism, see Cott, A Woman Making History, 1-28, 63-104.
8. MRB to Elsie Hill, July 10, 1921, in ibid., 100-101.
9. MRB, "The Feminist Progression," Independent Woman, 8 (June 1929), 141.
10. MRB, On Understanding Women (New York: 1931), quotation, 32.
11. MRB, "A Test for the Modern Woman," Current History, 37 (Nov. 1932), 179-80; MRB, "Women and Social Crises," Independent Woman, 14 (Jan. 1935), 31.
12. MRB, "After Equality--What?" Independent Woman, 9 (June 1930), 228.
13. Cott, A Woman Making History, 106; MRB to Alma Lutz, Jan. 29, 1937, biographical box 4, Alma Lutz Papers, Vassar College.
14. On Understanding Women, 33; MRB to Harriot Stanton Blatch, undated [1935], biographical box 4, Alma Lutz Papers, Vassar College.
15. MRB to Rose Arnold Powell, Aug. 10, 1935, folder 27, Powell Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
16. MRB to Dorothy Porter, Mar. 31, 1940, copy in Beard Papers, Schlesinger Library.
17. MRB to Margaret Grierson, Mar. 6, 1944, Beard Papers, Sophia Smith Collection.
18. MRB to Florence Cross Kitchelt, Mar. 17, 1950, folder 113, Kitchelt Papers, Schlesinger Library.



## INTRODUCTION OF ELLEN CHESLER

*Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*

• Ellen Chesler graduated from Vassar College and studied history at Columbia University where she received her M.A. She has been active in New York City politics and civic affairs. She managed the campaign of Carol Bellamy and in 1978-83 served as her Chief of Staff when Bellamy was NYC Council President. She returned to work on her Ph.D. dissertation on Sanger, and received the degree in 1989. She is an independent scholar, working outside academia. Early in 1992 she published *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*. It is an outstanding book, important both as a fascinating biography, and as a compendium of information about the movement for women's reproductive rights.



*Margaret Sanger, 1932* ♣ *photographer unknown*

REINTERPRETING MARGARET SANGER:  
THE BIOGRAPHERS' JOURNEY

*Ellen Chesler*

✿ It is a great honor and a great pleasure to speak at Smith on this marvelous occasion, for it was here many years ago that I first discovered Margaret Sanger. She came to life in the hundreds of boxes of letters and papers she left to this college; she made that bequest because in her long and always controversial career only Smith was willing to grant her an honorary degree.

The year was 1949, and other institutions had declined to honor Sanger's work for fear of antagonizing constituents still opposed to birth control. But Dorothy Brush, Margaret's dear friend and colleague and a Smith alumna, lined up distinguished men and women from all over the world to petition on Margaret's behalf. Dorothy's deft pen was also evident in the official citation that accompanied the degree, identifying Margaret as "leader in the worldwide study of population problems and pioneer in the American birth control movement; author, lecturer, and practical idealist; one who with deep sympathy for the oppressed and disinherited, yet with a dispassionate and scientific approach, has made a conspicuous contribution to human welfare through her integrity, courage and social vision."

The awards ceremony was a milestone of great significance to Margaret, who had actually left boarding school without completing a final year necessary for a degree and then later married before finishing the third year required for a registered nursing degree. Licensed only as a practical nurse, she had always been insecure about her lack of formal schooling, and when she returned home from Northampton she wrote enthusiastically to an old lover of hers in England, the writer Hugh de Selincourt, coyly demanding that he pay her appropriate respect now that she finally had proper academic credentials.

The Sophia Smith Collection was still housed in the basement of the Library back in the early 1970s when I devoured that letter and more. I have many fond memories of glorious summer days up here sojourning through the past, but, truthfully, it was never easy for me back then to be curling up

in the stacks with musty papers, however colorful and entertaining some of Margaret's love letters turned out to be!

So much was happening in the world then, as now—especially for women. And for better or worse, each time another opportunity for political engagement presented itself, I found myself leaving the library to work in some cause, some campaign, some government or other.

I have thus known the very special rewards of studying the course of one woman's life in American politics and social reform while also living some small parts of that life myself. And I have tried to enrich this first book of mine with the twin perspectives I have achieved from both practical experience and conventional scholarship.

Still, however far I strayed from Margaret Sanger, I always found myself pulled back. Her story confounded but also inspired me. It filled me at once with remorse and with joy. I could not believe how misunderstood and misrepresented she seemed to have been in the existing biographies or monographs that engaged her life. Everything I had learned about her here at Smith seemed so relevant to my own personal concerns. And so I returned to my research in 1986, after almost a decade away working in politics and government, convinced that I needed Margaret to help me reaffirm my own political identity and commitments as much as she needed me to rescue hers.

Knowing her better would more precisely illumine her achievements and the history of her times, but it would also yield important insights into the tensions of our own, as so many of us struggle to complete her still unfinished journey as feminist and social reformer.

I begin then today with a fundamental proposition of the biographer. That we study our pasts so that we can chart a clearer path for our own futures. That we dig into other people's lives so that we can know better how to live our own.

The general outlines of Margaret Sanger's life and work are familiar enough to most of you. She went to jail in 1917 for distributing contraceptives to immigrant women from a makeshift clinic in a tenement storefront in Brooklyn, New York. When she died fifty years later, the cause for which she defiantly broke the law had achieved international stature. Though still a magnet for controversy, she was widely eulogized as one of the great emancipators of her time.

For more than half a century Sanger dedicated herself to the deceptively simple proposition that access to a safe and reliable means of preventing pregnancy is a necessary condition of women's liberation and, in turn, of human progress. Her most exquisite triumphs were her last.

She was past seventy when the world finally began to heed her concern for unchecked population growth, past eighty when the team of doctors and scientists she had long encouraged first marketed the oral anovulant birth control pill. She lived to see the realization of her repeated efforts as a litigant and a lobbyist through the landmark 1965 ruling of the Supreme Court in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which guaranteed constitutional protection to the private use of contraceptives by married couples. She died just as Lyndon Johnson incorporated family planning into America's public health and social welfare programs (and committed at least a fraction of the nation's foreign policy resources to it), fulfilling her singular vision of how best to achieve peace and prosperity at home and abroad.

Since her death the rebirth of a vigorous feminist movement has given new resonance to Sanger's original claim that women have a fundamental right to control their own bodies. Her direct legacy endures in the far-reaching international family planning movement that descends from her pioneering organizational efforts. She has become an occasional scapegoat of extremists opposed to abortion or of black militants, who insist that family planning is genocidal in intent. But by and large she shares the ignoble fate of so many iconoclasts who have lived to see the routine acceptance of ideas once considered disturbing. She has been substantially forgotten.

Every woman in the world today who takes her sexual and reproductive autonomy for granted should venerate Margaret Sanger. With the full promise of scientific contraception still unfulfilled, with the right to legal abortion now compromised for those who cannot pay, and again at risk for all American women regardless of means, her courageous and determined career merits renewed consideration. But few even know her name.

Though she encountered enormous resistance in her own lifetime and still invites criticism, Margaret Sanger popularized ideas and built institutions that have widespread influence today. Her leadership, while often quixotic, helped create enduring changes in the beliefs and behavior of men and women who perceive themselves as modern, not only in America but

throughout the world.

Birth control and the promise of reproductive autonomy for women has fundamentally altered private life and public policy in the twentieth century. No other issue has for so long captivated our attention or so dramatically polarized our thinking. As the psychologist Erik Erikson once provocatively suggested, no idea of modern times, save perhaps for arms control, more directly challenges human destiny, which may account for the profound psychic dissonance and social conflict it tends to inspire. And which may, simply enough, account as well for why Margaret Sanger was so viciously attacked in life and so tragically diminished in death.

My uncompromising view of Sanger's central importance to the history of her times and of our own is hardly what young graduate students were taught when I first encountered Margaret Sanger in the 1970s.

Margaret had died only a few years earlier in 1966 at the age of eighty-seven following a decade of declining health and spirits. One biography, a superficial, journalistic celebration of her accomplishments, was published shortly thereafter. But the contemporary women's movement was just getting started, and women's history was still a discipline in its infancy. There was hardly any serious scholarship about women's lives or their work. Indeed, the publication of David Kennedy's career biography of Sanger in 1971, was considered pathbreaking, and we were all enthusiastic about it—until we read it.

Regrettably Kennedy won prizes for *Birth Control in America* despite a decidedly patronizing attitude toward his subject and some rather shockingly selective use of evidence. Sanger, by Kennedy's description, was simply too emotional, too hot-headed, too impractical. And what, he asked, was her real achievement? What was all the fuss about? The nation's birthrate had been declining steadily since 1800, long before she came on the scene. Despite laws that branded contraception obscene and illegal, drugstore and mail-order remedies such as condoms, pessaries, douches and other chemicals were widely circulated. And of course the diaphragm Margaret pioneered never really met with widespread acceptance.

Yes, Kennedy did acknowledge that Sanger had enjoyed a few judicial victories and had gained some public acceptance for family planning. But she never actually got the Comstock Laws changed and (in his view) may actual-

ly have set the cause back because, as he saw it, she didn't like men very much, had trouble getting along with just about everyone, was a bad politician, and an irrational anti-Catholic.

Kennedy was a young man just out of graduate school at Yale in those years, and—to give him his due—he wrote at a brief moment between the *Griswold* and *Roe* decisions of the Supreme Court when the cause of reproductive rights was momentarily triumphant in this country—and a relative peace replaced the storm engulfing this contentious issue in the years before and since. Perhaps he really could not understand what had been at stake for Margaret Sanger. What is more, he wrote in the wake of Betty Friedan's trenchant critique of the feminine sexual mystique, which was followed by a historiography that identified the 1920s as a time when women turned away from activism and back to personal concerns. In this context Margaret was a Robespierre of revolution, and he actually accused her of having subverted the accomplishments of the suffragists by turning women's attention back to sexuality and offering them a more palatable personal life that provided a false sense of liberation. The personal, said David Kennedy, is not political. He took a narrow view of the terms of women's liberation and the conditions of their empowerment. He seriously underestimated the gender and class discrimination Sanger had been made to endure. And he simply forgot that while contraception was around before Margaret Sanger, it was largely contraband and underground.

It was Margaret Sanger who understood the profound importance of bringing the issue out in the open and of talking about sex in public, something those of us who have since lived through the abortion struggle or seen the price Anita Hill was made to pay for talking openly about sexual harassment are less likely to ignore. Perhaps, like the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee Hill encountered, Kennedy held Margaret Sanger, a woman, to a higher standard of intellectual integrity and social comportment than he demanded of the male doctors, social scientists, politicians, and most especially Catholic priests who opposed her for so many years. For that, in my view, he can never be forgiven, but his book, in any event, is out of print, so we can speak of it comfortably in the past.

Fortunately James Reed came out with his *The Birth Control Movement and American Society: From Private Vice to Public Virtue* several years later and suc-

cessfully refuted Kennedy's distorted reading of Sanger's relationships with those physicians and philanthropists she did convert to the birth control cause. Reed's emphasis, however, was more on them than on her. His study was intended to document the history of contraception as a scientific invention and social idea. It was a judicious, important beginning but offered insufficient political or social context to rescue Sanger fully from Kennedy's attack.

What is more, Reed's interpretation was quickly overshadowed by the publication of Linda Gordon's *Women's Body: Women's Right*, which forcefully locates birth control in the history of feminist theory and activism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When it comes to Sanger, however, Gordon regrettably succumbed to polemic. Driven by fierce ideological commitments of her own, Gordon wrote a book about reproductive rights that consigned to a bit part the one woman who had dedicated herself to this cause for half a century. Unable to forgive Sanger for retreating from the left-wing idealism of her political engagements before World War I, Gordon portrays her as an unredeemed conservative who handed birth control over to social and intellectual elites more interested in social control than in social liberation.

There is no room for subtle arguments in this kind of critique. In Gordon's hands, Sanger and Planned Parenthood are one. They become the oppressors of all women to whom they offer a variety of sex education and marital counseling and of all ethnic Americans and people of color throughout the world who are encouraged to limit their fertility, even where the programs are voluntary. In treating these issues, Gordon argues as much by assertion as by evidence. She never really examined the grassroots political dimension of the birth control movement after 1920. Much of her research was partial, and her allegations undocumented.

Ironically, her attack reinforced the canards that have always been used against contraception by the extreme right and left, by Catholics and other opponents on fundamentalist religious grounds and by orthodox Marxists who saw a bright future in the unchecked reproduction of future soldiers of the proletariat. But coming from a scholar of Gordon's considerable stature—and with Margaret no longer around to defend herself—the critique has had a devastating impact.

A few years later another book on Sanger, Madeline Gray's *Champion of Birth Control*, examined the private life of this remarkable woman. Though increasingly cautious and personally discreet during her lifetime, Sanger preserved a personal and professional record of both rare intimacy and enormous scope. Her own life was in many respects a monument to the vision of freedom for women she embraced. She married twice and had many happy love affairs, and she wanted it known after her death that she had lived more or less contentedly by rules of her own devising. Regrettably Gray reduced Margaret's remarkable journey of self-discovery to the voyeuristic level of soap opera.

I confess that I was baffled when I first read these books and even more troubled when I returned to the archives myself after a long absence during which I served in New York City government and personally experienced some of the hazards that seem inevitably still in store for women in public life, especially those who dare to be outspoken.

The backlash against women that is much talked about today became very clear to me as I reconsidered the life and legacy of Margaret Sanger. In brief today, let me offer a few correctives to existing interpretations of Margaret Sanger's life and work though I unabashedly urge you to read my book for the full complexity of the portrait I have tried to draw of a woman who was neither saint nor sinner.

First, I want you all to remember that young Margaret Higgins, as she was born in 1879 in Corning, New York, was the middle (and in many respects the chosen) daughter of a rebellious, hard-drinking and ne'er-do-well Irish stonemason named Michael. But she also had a mother.

Michael is the one mostly talked about by Margaret herself in her autobiographies because for a girl to identify with her father, whatever his politics, was an ideal held sacred by the old-fashioned Victorians and new-fangled Freudians whose assumptions Margaret absorbed. Being Daddy's girl, in any event, made a better story, and Margaret was nothing if not a good storyteller. Her own oedipal absorption, moreover, has since served the purpose of Kennedy and others who explain Margaret's single-issue obsession with birth control as a product of the hostility to men and sexuality that was the residue of her unresolved anger toward her father.

I am not so sure. I actually think Margaret Sanger may have learned bet-



ter than most how to love men because she knew the love of an adoring and rather charming, if ineffectual, father. What she did learn from his failings as a provider for his family was never to trust or rely completely on a man. Not a bad lesson if you decide to grow up and challenge fundamental principles of patriarchy. And once again, let us recall Margaret's tough and determined Irish mother.

Anne Higgins was the mother of eleven. She was overburdened and often ill. But she was nonetheless resourceful and instilled in her daughter both a powerful motivation to improve her own lot and the essential habits of self-discipline that made it possible for her to do so.

Michael Higgins taught Margaret to defy, but her mother and her older sisters taught her to comport. The balance served her well, and from all she took away a distinctive resolve to invent a better life for herself and for others.

Second, let no one be fooled by the accusation that Margaret Sanger was never a *bona fide* political or social radical in her youth before World War I. She emerged on the American scene in those halcyon days at the turn of this century when it was easy to believe in the potential of individual and social renewal, in the inevitability of human progress. The country seemed wide open with possibility. Frustrated by her work as a visiting nurse in New York City's bleak immigrant slums after her young marriage turned sour, she first teamed up with labor radicals and bohemians to organize strikes and pickets and pageants in the hope of achieving wholesale economic and social justice. "No Gods, No Masters," the rallying cry of the International Workers of the World, became her personal and political manifesto.

But hers was not a politics confined to the parlor or to Greenwich Village coffee houses or bedrooms, however unorthodox her private behavior in these years. From 1910 through 1919, she raised children, earned the more substantial living of the two breadwinners in her family, and still found time for politics and protest, which as often as not turned to violence. She went to jail on two occasions for her convictions as a labor activist, and her convictions under the Comstock Laws had as much to do with the company she kept with anarchists and other subversives as they did with anything else. Margaret was intoxicated by the heady romanticism of Greenwich Village bohemia, genuinely moved by the tragic plight of the immigrant women and children

she nursed on New York's Lower East Side, and inspired by Emma Goldman's forceful doctrines, even as the two women jostled for celebrity and quarreled over personal differences. It is a mistake to undermine the legitimacy and courage of her early political convictions (as she was herself guilty of doing later when she wrote autobiographies intended as political tracts in the battle to incorporate birth control into the New Deal).

Let no one believe, as well, that Margaret Sanger turned her back on the left after World War I because she completely lost her idealism or her faith in social reform. As Michael Higgins's daughter she could never tolerate empty gestures. She was intent on achieving real change. What she did abandon was any confidence that violent social upheaval would triumph or that it remained much of a practical possibility in America, in any event, after the enormous repression of the American Left during World War I.

She changed her means but not her ends. And she embraced a philosophy that made sense to her and many of her European contemporaries. After her indictment for writing about birth control in 1914, on the reasonable assumption that she would receive the same oppressive jail sentence that had been handed down to other New York radicals in her circle, she spent a year in exile in England. There through such social theorists as Havelock Ellis and H. G. Wells, both of whom became her mentors, lovers, and lifelong friends, she embraced a Fabian philosophy of educating elites in an attempt to bring about revolution from the top down.

Margaret lost confidence in the power of working people to unite for change, but she decided to invest in the collective potential of women. The victory for women's suffrage had been achieved through the efforts of elite women who were oriented to activism and looking for a new cause. She mobilized many of them in the birth control movement and remained a committed feminist until her death, always disappointed that some of the most political women of her day, like Carrie Chapman Catt of the National Women's Party, would never endorse birth control because they feared talking about sex in public. Even Margaret herself found it more and more impractical to be strident on the issue, especially during the dark years of the Great Depression. It hardly made sense to argue for the individual rights of women, sexual or otherwise, when collective strategies were in vogue and when families and communities were under siege. Far from undermining the

political and economic advancement of women, however, she saw nothing wrong in wanting us to have it all or in establishing birth control as a necessary condition to the resolution of our often conflicting needs.

Margaret Sanger envisioned a united front of women who would claim the legalization of contraception, along with greater public candor about sexuality, as a fundamental right. Birth control, she argued, would enhance the opportunities of women beyond the promises of economic reformers, on the one hand, and of suffragists on the other. It would be a tool for redistributing power fundamentally, in the bedroom, the home, and the larger community. Women would achieve personal freedom by experiencing their sexuality free of consequence, just as men have always done, but in taking control of the forces of reproduction they would also lower birth rates, alter the balance of supply and demand for labor, and therein accomplish the revolutionary goals of workers without the social upheaval of class warfare. Bonds of gender would transcend divisions of ethnicity, race, or class. Not the dictates of Karl Marx but the refusal of women to bear children indiscriminately would alter the course of history.

Through the 1920s and 30s she had divorced herself from her radical past, bested her competitors for leadership, and made her name virtually synonymous with the birth control cause. With an uncanny feel for the power of a well-communicated idea in a democracy, she wrote best-selling books, published a widely read journal, held conferences, gave lectures, and built a thriving voluntary social organization. Her intent was nothing less than to construct an international network of clinics where women would receive a full range of preventive health care services.

To this end, she had no choice but to mobilize men of influence in business, government, labor, the emerging professions and academic sciences, but—make no mistake about this either—her most active recruits always remained women, many of them veterans of suffrage, as I have said, or daughters of former volunteers who had learned to do political battle. Her pioneering facilities provided contraception, preventive gynecology, sex education, marriage counseling, and infertility services to poor women and to many who could afford private doctors but simply preferred a sympathetic female environment. Under the best circumstances they became laboratories for her idealism, but as often as not the experiment failed, and even Sanger

herself grew disillusioned.

The birth control movement stalled during the long years of Depression and World War II, stymied by the cost and complexity of the task of reaching women most in need, engulfed by internal dissension, and overwhelmed by the barrage of opposition it provoked. Timid politicians shied away from sexual controversy and refused to reform anachronistic obscenity laws. Many women feared compromising hard-won political gains, especially as birth rates plummeted in the face of economic crisis, precipitating another generation's backlash against their increasing independence. In the social sciences, biological explanations for human behavior lost favor. Eugenic ideas about manipulating heredity, at first the province of progressive proponents of social reform, quickly deteriorated into an excuse for the control of undesirables on the straightforward basis of race and class. And Sanger, among others, was forced to condemn them.

Here I want to pause for just a moment and examine the eugenics issue in a little more detail. Margaret Sanger, along with a great many Americans in the 1920s, from ordinary workers and farmers to university professors, Supreme Court justices and indeed many on the Left, including her own dear friend Norman Thomas, argued that sensible programs of social reform ought to address the manner in which heredity and other biological factors, as well as environmental ones, affect human health, intelligence and opportunity. The idea of intervening medically to improve the quality of the human race became nothing short of a popular craze in this country.

As Margaret grew more and more despairing of Marxism as a tool for achieving wholesale social justice, she saw new possibilities in the idea of helping those most in need through a comprehensive program of preventive social medicine, much as Gregor Mendel improved his soil mixture in order to propagate a better pea. Genetics was at a rather primitive stage of scientific understanding, and like many of the progressives of her day, Margaret possessed what was perhaps a naive confidence in the ability of science to do good. She endorsed intelligence testing (then a rage) and also laws that provided for the forced sterilization of individuals (almost always in institutions and predominately white, not black) who did not measure up to fixed standards.

Sanger was always careful to distinguish, however, between individual

applications of eugenic principles and cultural ones. She spoke out against immigration acts and other measures that promoted ethnic or racial stereotypes with a biological rationale. She worked through her entire career to provide reproductive autonomy to poor women, including women of color, because she saw it as an essential tool of individual liberation and social justice, not of social control.

During the 1920s, Sanger courted eugenicists who at first opposed birth control because they feared population decline. A decade later, during the depression, she won the endorsement of the American eugenics movement, but only after it had more carefully defined its objectives as the promotion of policies to advance human heredity “without regard to class, race, or creed.”

Margaret was never a racist or a bigot though she was attacked viciously on these grounds by conservative opponents, especially, in her own day, by the Catholic Church and, more recently, by fundamentalist opponents of abortion who have circulated scurrilous pamphlets about the racist legacy of Planned Parenthood throughout the country, especially in the South and Midwest. Margaret was always careful to distinguish between voluntary and coercive applications of birth control, though at a point in the 1950s when she was ill and intemperate about the slow pace of change she blithely suggested a program of bonus sterilization that would reward families who volunteered to stop having more babies. Still, I argue that, like most responsible family planning advocates and policy makers since, she struggled to balance the rights of individuals against her larger vision of the collective social good.

During the 1930s, Sanger valiantly tried to advance a program of birth control in the South because the region was less vulnerable to Catholic influence and because American blacks had substantially been left out of New Deal entitlements. She worked with the full support of the leaders of the black community and with the help of Eleanor Roosevelt, who in 1939 finally broke free of political constraints that had been placed upon her in order to help Margaret advance this Negro program, which was advertised as “a unique experiment in race building and a humanitarian service to a race subjected to discrimination, hardship, and segregation.” Let me read to you from the statement of intent: “Birth control, *per se*, cannot correct economic conditions that result in bad housing, overcrowding, poor hygiene, malnutrition and neglected sanitation but can reduce the attendant loss of life, health and hap-

piness that spring from these conditions.”

Why has the record been so distorted, the legacy so misunderstood?

First, we must recognize that while Sanger herself may not have been a racist, she lived in a profoundly bigoted society, and, like many others, she never unequivocally repudiated prejudice among her own opponents. While she privately disdained the elitism of many of the powerful individuals she drew as supporters, she did not rebuke it publicly, and this has haunted her ever since.

Sanger was also the victim of extraordinary Catholic intimidation. I haven't time today to fully explain this dimension of my book, but by the way of summary, let me say that I argue (I hope persuasively) that undermining Sanger's character proved to be the most effective tool of those who opposed her fundamental message about empowering women by securing their reproductive autonomy.

For the first time in its history in this country, the Catholic Church created a national mechanism for lobbying and for mobilizing its core constituency of faithful women. Margaret was identified as a dangerous subversive, intent on destroying the family and limiting the fertility of the very people she was trying to help. Since her death this canard has been perpetuated on college campuses by the works of Kennedy and Gordon, who regrettably have given credibility to the insidious attacks of the antiabortion New Right.

In her own day, the alliance Margaret forged with the country's establishment came to haunt her as the votes of urban Catholics and rural Southerners became critical to the Presidential ambitions of Franklin Roosevelt. Bending to political considerations, the New Deal, in one important respect, proved to be the same old deal for American women. Birth control was denied a place in the social welfare and public health agenda of this triumphant social program because Franklin Roosevelt and other politicians of the era needed Catholic votes and were intimidated by the threat of Catholic political pressure. And we have paid a heavy price since. While other advanced democratic nations, such as England and even France, created systems of child support during the Depression and also paid for contraception through public health programs, America did not. And so today we agonize over the deficiencies of a family welfare system that is criticized for rewarding women who have children, while it still does not provide us all the

tools we need to control our own bodies.

Embittered by her failure to win support at home, Margaret Sanger grew personally irritable, politically conservative, and rabidly anti-Catholic as she grew older. Disenchanted with the increasing pronatalism of postwar America after years of deferred fertility, she turned her attention abroad and struggled valiantly, though never with complete success, to secure her stature among a new generation of international population policy makers and to imbue population programs in the developing nations of the world with her never-wavering concern for the precarious status of women.

This may have been her foremost achievement. The International Planned Parenthood Federation that grew out of her work in 1948 remains today the largest not-for-profit provider of contraception and abortion services in the world. And as the model for direct government programs it is in large measure responsible for the worldwide revolution in fertility that has taken place since the 1960s. Sixty million women in the world today take the birth control pill, for which Margaret Sanger is directly responsible because she found the money to support its development and dissemination when others said it would never work. And despite periodic alarms, the potent drug has proved remarkably effective and medically benign. Many women are also using high-tech contraceptives such as IUDs and implants, developed by the Population Council and other groups who at first resented what they called the "feminist" bias of family planning programs and doubted the determination of the women of the world to take a daily oral medication. They have been proved wrong.

Since 1965 and especially in recent years, the rate of population growth has unexpectedly slowed in almost all countries in the world outside of Africa, even as absolute numbers continue to grow precipitously everywhere but a handful of developed nations. Most baffling, however, have been the extreme variations from one culture to another in reproductive behavior and in the success of organized family planning initiatives. Efforts to understand these patterns and to analyze alternative strategies for intervention are finally reawakening interest in the relationship between fertility and the status of women. And contemporary population policy makers are finally inclined to concede Margaret's insistent view that women are inherently better motivated to limit their fertility and should be identified as primary agents of social

change. Programs seem to work best, moreover, when contraception is offered as part of a larger package of maternal and infant health care reforms delivered under paramedical auspices, just as she pioneered in this country and always intended. Prodded by contemporary feminists in the field, population planners are finally investing in the overall health and welfare of women, because it has been demonstrated that to do so reduces birthrates most effectively.

In 1931 Margaret Sanger received a medal of honor from the American Woman's Association. The award was presented by Eleanor Roosevelt, who a year later was made a prisoner of the White House and, like our own Barbara Bush, so long as her husband remained President, simply never again spoke in public about women's reproductive rights.

The award was presented to Margaret as a "woman of integrity, vision, and valor." And it occasioned the following comment from the *New York Herald Tribune*, which I used as the epigraph of my book and with which I shall end this lecture.

*Mrs. Sanger deserves this honor; she deserves more honors than a world against whose darkness of mind she has fought bravely and consistently for twenty years is ever likely to give her. Mrs. Sanger has carved, almost single-handed and in the face of every variety of persecution, a trail through the densest jungle of human ignorance and helplessness. She has been many times arrested, assailed and covered with mud—which remains perhaps the most substantial tribute to her pioneering genius. Pretty nearly everything and everyone has been against her—pulpits and legislatures and newspapers, public men and private citizens, and whole regiments of the prejudices, fears, bogeys and dragons that still infest the mind of civilized man.*

But such is the common sense of what she has been saying, and so great the courage and conviction of her way of saying it, that people, have at last begun to listen and believe. Her victory is not by any means complete, but the dragons are on the run. This editorial was written sixty years ago, but even today Margaret Sanger's journey is not complete. The dragons are back. And that is why I chose the image of a Woman of Valor as a title to inspire us all once again.



## INTRODUCTION OF CAROLYN G. HEILBRUN

*Kathleen Banks Nutter*

*Ph.D. Candidate, University of Massachusetts/Amherst*

✿ Typically, Carolyn Heilbrun told me not to say anything about her, but I will anyway.

Carolyn Heilbrun has been Avalon Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, where she has taught modern British literature, the novel, biography, and feminism. She has held several fellowships and taught at other colleges, including Columbia and Yale Law Schools. (Isn't it comforting to think that the future lawyers of the land have had the benefit of her wit and wisdom?) Carolyn has also received several honorary degrees, including one from Smith College. Her published works include *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*, and *Writing a Woman's Life*, a book useful to me and many other scholars. Carolyn is now writing the biography of Gloria Steinem.

And that is how I came to know her. She is not only an accomplished scholar but a wonderful human being. As Carolyn's research assistant, I slogged through the seventy-eight boxes of Gloria Steinem's papers I came to call Gloriana, now part of the Sophia Smith Collection. Although I never quite mastered the peculiarities of the laptop from hell Carolyn provided and Xeroxed enough to paper a small room, I remain honored by the opportunity to work on this important biography.

The Steinem Collection is a rich one, documenting not just a woman's life but an entire movement. As such, it is indicative of all that the Sophia Smith Collection is—an incredibly important resource for student and academic alike. We are most fortunate to have it.

It is my pleasure and honor to introduce my former boss and now friend, Carolyn Heilbrun.

SOME THOUGHTS ON WRITING  
THE BIOGRAPHY OF GLORIA STEINEM

*Carolyn G. Heilbrun*

✿ When Gloria Steinem suggested that I become her biographer, the idea appealed to me: it was an abrupt change from my past endeavors at the same time that it permitted me to undertake something I had long desired, the biography of a woman. I had earlier hoped to write the biographies of Dorothy L. Sayers and Vera Brittain, but these two had been refused me as subjects by their literary executors. In the case of Sayers, a man wrote the, to me inadequate, authorized biography; in the case of Brittain the biography has not yet been published. Steinem seemed a rare chance to write of an American woman whose life was lived through all but eight years of my own, and who was a feminist. A few initial explorations confirmed that she was not a difficult person to get along with, a racist, a homophobe, an antisemite, or an egomaniac, all faults certainly shared, though unevenly distributed, between my previously considered women subjects. In time, Steinem's own generosity to me, her openness, her willingness to have me talk with anyone confirmed that I had indeed chosen, or rather been chosen by, a most sympathetic and accessible subject.

Someone who has been a professional for all of her mature life becomes eager to see her career swerve sharply, but not disastrously, at the beginning of her sixties. I found myself, therefore, mysteriously but happily ready to follow my impulse to take on a job that was in the realm, but far from the exact location, of my life's work.

Most of Steinem's life had been lived either in the glare of the media or in the unnoticed fervor of grassroots politics, both to me mysterious terrains. At the same time, she had, over a period of many years, spoken with remarkable openness to reporters and interviewers of her experiences and ideas; I could hardly hope that there were any dark secrets to be uncovered by a detective, however devoted I was to that kind of investigation. But since her views were sympathetic and her life blatantly different from my own, I took up eagerly this chance to explain and illuminate the life of a woman whose biography would be incongruous with my own—most obviously a woman

beautiful and endlessly slim—and yet emphatically a part of the fervent and changing times in which we both lived.

What I had failed to recognize until I was more than a year into the project and had read almost everything published about her and interviewed the major figures in her life, was that I was analyzing a life without a text or, more exactly, a life that did not offer a text to provide a tension I had taken so for granted that I had never previously questioned its necessity. I was writing the biography of a woman who had not written a book on her own initiative.

The irony of this increased: as I worked on Steinem's biography, and as she cooperated with me in a spirit of true generosity, she was herself writing her first book, a study of the sources of self-esteem. Like much else in her life, it was destined to be popular, but much of its popularity was owed to incidents from her own life she had used for illustration. Indeed, she told me early in our acquaintance that her first version of the book, two hundred pages of it, had been notable for the fact that she and her voice were altogether missing. Now that she had corrected that error, I found myself asking her, with a certain petulance, whose life she thought hers was anyway. I now had a text, even, perhaps, a literary text, but was it too late? Had Steinem now related in printed form the whole story of her life, leaving me only a few scattered anecdotes to collect and place in some order?

And there was more. In a biography, one hopes, even without texts and certainly where texts exist, to somehow place in tension the outer person and the inner truth. With most people this is, indeed, child's play. Most of us think of ourselves with generosity, attributing good will to our motives to an extent that others may not accept. Steinem's case is different. She has her enemies but they are few, if intense. Almost none of those who spoke with me found any reason to challenge her good intentions or her general kindness and effectiveness.

I was left therefore with a subject who, first, had no mystery to reveal, difficult and unlikely as that might seem; the few facts less than widely known related to her life in the eighties, when she was in her early fifties, and it was these she had chosen to write about in her own book. Who, second, had produced no texts open to literary interpretation before I began my own. Who, third, had engaged throughout her life in little or no introspection and had



Gloria Steinem, *Ms.* magazine editor, 1983 ~~so~~ photograph by Marianne Barcellona, *People Weekly*

discovered, when late in life she took it up under professional guidance, that it revealed nothing of a startling nature. Finally, while she was a woman whose life might be one version of an exemplary female destiny, she could hardly be held up as pointing the way to women in general: she was too good-looking, too clearly a sex object, too nice, too self-effacing, too fond of men and, with all these conventional female characteristics, perhaps the most widely-known radical feminist of her time. (I acknowledge the need to defend my characterization of her feminism as radical, and I shall eventually do so, but not today.)

My only hope for a coherent and interesting biography, beyond the presentation of those facts which any competent and patient researcher could accumulate for herself, was to try to resolve the anomaly of a feminist who was also ideally “feminine.” If, as seemed likely, the second term of this anomaly turned out to be, like the ideal itself, a chimera, then how would one describe her palpable attractiveness? The central question remained.

I had begun with Deirdre Bair’s desire as she described it in the introduction to her biography of Simone de Beauvoir. I wanted, she said, to write the life of a woman “whose professional life was intellectually stimulating to me and whose personal life was satisfactory to her.” Surely, I told myself, this was true of Steinem; and indeed it was. But I had not realized how strong

had been the tension between Beauvoir's life—both her childhood and her adult experiences as an intellectual and a lover—and her eventual feminism, her accomplishments as a woman. The only tension palpable in Steinem's life was between how she had been treated as a woman before 1969 and her recognition that year of how paradigmatic her experience was of the condition of women everywhere and at all times. That realization was sudden, stunning, as though, she would say, a light had been turned on in a dark room and for the first time she saw. After that, there she was, Gloria Steinem, a fighter for the dispossessed and for women, across all race and class boundaries.

What was I to do with this? There was the simple task, as Sayers liked to say, of getting at the facts. If we today consider facts less easily established than Sayers did, still there were a number of misunderstandings that needed correction. I had been told by casual acquaintances that Steinem broke up marriages, had had her face lifted, admired detestable people, had shouted at men who refused to marry her, was an agent of the CIA and the FBI for which organizations *Ms.* magazine was the tool, and other fables so preposterous as to be hardly worthy of consideration, were it not for the media-controlled world in which we live. These stories were always the meaner and more emphatic the greater the distance between the speaker and Steinem. Unfamiliarity, too, breeds contempt and calumny.

It is, in any case, doubtful if lying stories are ever laid to rest; in my experience, they are not, on the wholly erroneous assumption that where there is smoke there is fire. As my husband reported to me from his service in the Navy in World War II, there are also smoke-making machines.

And who was I to be writing this? I am her opposite, or so it has come to seem to me. Lonely from a child, I have had, until recently, few "best friends," as, in memory of her childhood, Steinem calls those she meets, likes, and sees often. My professional life has been passed in academia, which Steinem considers the most hurtful of all institutions. Because, she explains, there is no bottom line. If the students like you, the faculty hates you; if the faculty likes you, the administration hates you, and so on. In the corporate world at least—and she has little enough good to say of it—there is a bottom line: money. Within the academic world, however, although I have long been lonely and isolated as a woman and then as a feminist, I have had the satis-

faction of teaching and learning in an ordered way. Steinem has always wanted to write books, but her only writing, until this recent book, has been to order. I have written fifteen books, and each was done because I wanted to do it. Also, I have been long married and have three children. And so on.

In the end, I decided that the challenge might defeat me but that I would not shy from the attempt. An unwillingness to return the rather large advance (large for me, not for Tom Wolfe and Judith Krantz or Sara Paretsky) was one factor, but I knew in my darkest moments this reluctance was insufficient to deter me should I resolve to give up the task. After all, my hope had been for biographies of women that might serve, in turn, to enlarge the range of possibilities open to younger or daring older women. Steinem was beautiful and she was smart. Many women are, to any noticeable extent, neither. Could a life not unlike hers be possible for a reader who was neither that attractive nor that brainy? Steinem was resourceful, courageous, and untiring on behalf of others, yet like many women she had long needed to learn how to deal with conflict, and how, willingly, to confront those who attacked her. This struggle, never easy, was worth relating.

Clearly a woman who did not lack opportunities to marry, she chose not to. A woman who could have had children, she chose not to. A woman who found men intensely attractive, she was as woman-identified as any woman has been. A woman readily raised to the middle-class, and indeed descended from it, she spent her youth among the working class and never identified herself as middle-class or confined her efforts to those in that category. If she was in many ways good, noble, and magnanimous, she also liked to dress up, to dance, to party, to go to movies, and to watch late-night television. She was, in short, a woman of our time.

What about Steinem's relation to feminism? Steinem and the women's movement are not coterminous or equivalent. She is not the movement and cannot represent it. She is, however, indistinguishable from it and cannot be understood outside of its history. I was, for a brief time, made happy with the thought that, fitted in around Steinem's life like the stuff fruit is packed and shipped in, was the history of the feminist movement, and I would provide an account of it—without, of course, being an historian—that would at least be of some use amid the general dearth of such histories. A number, I have learned, are being written by competent historians and political scientists but

too late for this biography.

It needs no historian to tell us that I shall not be able to write history here. I can only offer what I have learned about feminist events in the past thirty or so years, about those Steinem took part in, and about the ways various branches of the women's movement intersected and interacted with each other and with her.

Looking back now, I find it strange that Steinem and I never met, although I, as a *Ms.* subscriber and as a reader of the *New York Times* and, occasionally, other print media, knew of her, and she, I learned from her papers, had read a book of mine as long ago as 1979. To my astonishment Kathleen Nutter, my research assistant, turned up a summons to a meeting in 1974 in the house of Alice Kessler-Harris sent to both Steinem and me, as well as to others. Steinem did not remember being there, I did not remember being there, and Alice Kessler-Harris did not remember Steinem being there. So much for clues to historical fact.

In undertaking the biography of Steinem, I had, as I early discovered, undertaken to write the life of a woman who, unlike many others, had never wished to be a boy. And, unlike her admired forebears, Susan B. Anthony, spinster-virgin, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, mother of eight, she had found a woman's life that was not easy, but neither was it compromised either by the repression of sexuality or the uncontrolled results of fertility.

Steinem herself sees it as a life in which she had less control, less direction than she might have wished. Only in the last few years has she ordered her life and felt in charge of it. Yet, to me she seems from the beginning to have known, without knowing she knew, where she was going and what she would do. As Ursula K. Le Guin has written:

*When you find the hidden catch  
in the secret drawer  
behind the false panel  
inside the concealed compartment  
in the desk in the attic  
of the house in the dark forest,  
and press the spring firmly,  
a door flies open to reveal*

*a bundle of old letters,  
and in one of them  
is a map  
of the forest  
that you drew yourself  
before you ever went there.\**

I have not time today to say very much more, but I'll end with the concept all biographers of unconventional women face: that the subject of the biography will be slow, or perhaps unable, to recognize the "map of the forest," but she will certainly not be as slow as her contemporaries. The Steinem before the women's movement was unfulfilled not only because she was not allowed to do what she wanted to do and would later do but also because the media had no genre, no ready story, in which to put her. They were faced with a woman beautiful, intelligent, glamorous, and socially radical; they floundered and still flounder for a definition of such a woman. That task of definition is, for the moment, mine.

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## INTRODUCTION OF JANE WHITE

Margery N. Sly

*Smith College Archivist and Archivist for Records in the Sophia Smith Collection*

✿ Eight weeks after Jane White graduated from Smith in 1944, she was cast in the Broadway adaptation of *Strange Fruit*, a novel about an inter-racial love affair. She has been acting and singing professionally ever since, in roles as diverse as Queen Agravaïne in the Broadway and television productions of *Once Upon A Mattress* to her Obie-winning Volumnia in *Coriolanus* to the Duchesse de Krakenthorpe in *The Daughter of the Regiment* with the Metropolitan Opera Company to herself in her one-woman show, *Jane White, Who?...*

When asked to join in the Sophia Smith Collection's anniversary celebration by performing a scene from one of those past roles, Jane saw that as too confining. It didn't give her the latitude to examine something she'd been thinking about 'as the days trickle down to a precious few': "how truly mysterious it is to be an actor." She asked herself, "Why would anyone with sense choose the theatre as a life's work? Or is one chosen for it, by dint of one's heritage, one's assets or one's deficits? Where does a talent for it come from anyway? How much of the rest of your life is cheated or fulfilled by this work? What about success and failure, are they important? Questions, questions...and this after 47 years on the boards!" Jane's contribution to "Revealing Women's Life Stories" became a dramatic meditation, using slides made from photographs in her papers in the Sophia Smith Collection and a script she composed from her life. She 'talked about a theatrical life, showed some pictures, shared a few backstage tidbits, had some laughs, and examined what it has meant to be an actor—a woman, a black, and an American.' She shared herself in "Life as an Actress: A Mystery Story."

LIFE AS AN ACTRESS:  
A MYSTERY STORY

*Jane White*



1923 • photographer unknown

• Here's a cute, round child, eighteen months old, waving to you from a park in Harlem in 1923. She's the first child of Leah Gladys Powell (from Philadelphia, descendant of a female slave from Madagascar, a full-blooded Cherokee Indian, and many slave-master couplings during the 1800s) and Walter Francis White (from Atlanta, the blue-eyed, blond, white-skinned product of Southern interracial coupling run amok but who, at thirteen, in the face of an attack on his black neighborhood by the good white burghers, decided once and for all to

identify himself with his black heritage).

So here is this child with the world spread out before her, probably programmed at that time to be a wife and mother, perhaps a secretary, but above all to "stay in her place" in a world where there was still lynching, voter restriction, black and white drinking fountains—and you weren't even welcome on the streets of New York City below 110th Street.

But she was lucky. Her father was then Assistant Secretary of the NAACP and a writer who was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship to produce a novel. Being no fool, he decided to write it in France. Here she is on the terrace of Villa Home Sweet Home which the family rented for \$250 a year in Villefranche-sur-Mer. It's 1927, she's five-and-a-half years old and that's her brother, who is almost one. She's showing a certain flair in that hat—don't you think?—and fluency in language, going to a local French *école* and dealing with the *bonne à toute faire*, whose name was Vittoria and who came from Genova and spoke a patois that often only this child could comprehend and

translate. Thirty-four years later Jane White was to marry a Ligurian. Could Vittoria have been a foreshadow? A mystery...

It's now 1932 and she's ten years old. She was ribbed, not entirely kindly, by her parents for being "pose-y." But she played an Egyptian who was being menaced by a student in a crocodile costume in the school play at Ethical Culture and was getting a taste of the stage. She was also having terrible trouble with her hair.

By seventeen all my black ancestry came muscling in, and my hair was so unruly that I cried over it a lot. There was nothing wrong in all of this, but I didn't know it in 1939. We were living in a period when even black society believed that the lighter-skinned you were the more acceptable, and it was somehow a source of shame to me to be so brown in the midst of this family. Add to this that I was slow in school; at one point I had had to be tutored in math and reading. My home life was not exactly functional, with my father away most of the time doing extraordinary things for the advancement of the "colored" race (as we were *then* known) but short-tempered, impatient and uncommunicative at home, my mother harassed and struggling with no money, and my brother having gotten all the eyelashes! In school at Fieldston, where I was one of two colored students, I was called Pinky and seem to have distinguished myself mostly by singing "Deep Purple" to little knots of classmates in the corridors between classes. In sum,



1927 • photographer unknown



1932 • photograph by James L. Allen



*The White family, 1939*

☛ photograph by G. M. Wilson

I was confused, unsure and solitary and I adjusted to all of that by being defensive, touchy, and rather arrogant. An associate of my father's commented, "She's a proud beauty!"

Smith College was a bittersweet experience. Mr. Neilson had approached my father in the late 1930s about desegregating the college a little bit, so between 1940 and 1944 there were three of us, girls from select families who were "credits to their race": the brilliant daughter of the first black Police Surgeon in New York City, my cousin Minnie, who finished her stint

as a Phi Beta Kappa and *summa cum laude*, and me, who tended to get C's. It was the beginning of my split-personality period. On the one hand, I was *Walter White's daughter*, majoring in Sociology, as expected, very careful of my image, rather prudish, wary, wanting to be like everyone else on campus with the cashmere sweaters, real pearls, and proper Frank's moccasins I couldn't afford. The other Jane White minored in Music, studied lieder singing with Anna Hamlin, was in the Dance Group, fenced, and wound up as one of the three heads of Student Government. I graduated with a fine base for learning and not the faintest clue to who I was or what I wanted to do or *could* do in life!

In 1945 I was a leading lady on Broadway.

Here I am onstage at New York's Royale Theater as Nonnie in Lillian Smith's own adaptation of her novel *Strange Fruit* about a doomed black-white love affair in Georgia, and that's the leading man Mel Ferrer, who later married Audrey Hepburn. How in the world did all this happen, you may ask? Pure fluke. Jose Ferrer, who was to direct the play, asked his former co-star from *Othello*, Paul Robeson, if he knew of any presentable, reasonably intelligent young black woman who might fill the leading female role. Paul Robeson said Walter White had a daughter who might do. I, in the meanwhile, was enrolled in a ten-week introductory acting class to find out if the

theater might be my metier. (Another young woman who was doing the same thing in that class was Felicia Montelegre who went on to a terrific TV career and married Leonard Bernstein.) The class met one night a week, but during the day I was a proofreader at the Research Institute of America and going nowhere. One day I was summoned to the phone in the office, and the caller said “This is Jose Ferrer.” Sure, I thought, some joke! But when I finally suspended my disbelief, I imagined him on the other end of the line in his Iago costume!



In “*Strange Fruit*,” 1945  
☛ photograph by Fred Fehl

The play rehearsed in New York, went on tour for three months to Toronto, Montreal, Boston and Philadelphia, and ran for about six months on Broadway (in a time when productions could last quite a while even if they weren’t huge hits). But *Strange Fruit* was a *succès d’estime*: Eleanor Roosevelt wrote about it several times in her newspaper column, audiences came to wonder at it and its exposure of so delicate and tabu a subject as an interracial affair (when few black actors had been seen in Broadway productions in anything but servants’ roles). As for me, I’d been lost but now I was *found*!

Eight years later I was on Broadway for the third time, in *Take a Giant Step* with Louis Gossett, Jr., in his first professional role. Meanwhile there had been acting classes (to learn how to do it right), voice classes, dance training, some Off-Broadway and stock work, jobs as a salesclerk, some TV work as a Latina at a time when no Hispanic actors were given work in the profession, jobs in offices, a role as a native girl in a strange Broadway play, *The Climate of Eden*, adapted and directed by Moss Hart that lasted about a month. I had also been fired twice from Broadway plays because I was too light-skinned to be believable as a Negro woman. Even in this one there was great concern that Lou would seem to be involved with a white girl—horrors!—but none of their efforts to lower the lighting or darken my makeup seemed to work. I was in constant fear that I’d be fired again.



In "Take A Giant Step," 1953  
☛ photograph by John Erwin

I was also beginning a forty-year-long intermittent questioning of whether I was in the right career. My father had made it very clear right after *Strange Fruit* that he loathed the idea. On the other hand, there were always good notices for me and predictions of future triumph, but in the meantime nothing I was in ever lasted more than a month (and seldom that), my employment was always random and unpredictable, never based on what I'd done before, and I was past thirty. Geraldine Page and Jason Robards, classmates of mine, were well

on their way. What was the matter with me? It was a mystery I couldn't solve.

In 1959 my career opened up. I got a call from a man I'd worked with in 1950, asking me to audition for a part in a new musical George Abbott was going to direct. Was I going to say no? The word came back that my reading of the Queen had been brilliant, but... would I be willing to have a make-up job done on me and then audition again? Why, I ask. Because Mr. Abbott thought you looked too, er, too European. You mean too Negro? Yes, says my friend, with audible relief. It may strike you as bizarre that, in view of my intense need to succeed, I said I had to think about it and would call him back. What troubled me was that they didn't seem to want me but someone else. Of course, I could have resolved the whole dilemma instantly if I had figured out who me was! Well, I called myself an actor, didn't I? And actors had to wear various guises, and the need for various guises was what created actors in the first place, so was me even definable or relevant? I called my friend and said yes, and in what I've always called my Ingrid Bergman makeup I got the part. Carol Burnett and Jack Gilford and I and the rest of the company played in *Once Upon A Mattress* for a year and subsequently did two CBS-TV specials of it, one in black and white in 1962 and one in color in 1974 (in which Bernadette Peters and Elliot Gould took over two of the smaller roles). I've

never been happier. The Queen used everything of me: my diction, my singing voice, the dance I had studied, my womanliness, and my hauteur. For years after I would hear that directors who wanted somewhat bitchy elegance from their performers would say “think Jane White.”

So after that it was smooth sailing, right? Hardly! There were still part-time jobs, coaching and teaching, unemployment insurance which I found humiliating, once a year a job in the theater, and I was thirty-eight.

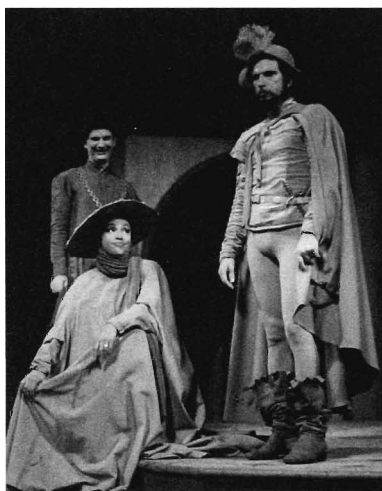
In the summer of 1960, by another fluke, I got the chance to play Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* at Joseph Papp’s Public Theater in Central Park, replacing Colleen Dewhurst, pregnant with her first child by George C. Scott. I was the first black actress to appear at the New York Shakespeare Festival in a major role. I was successful in it, a lot of men fell in love with me, and I felt instantly at home in the language and surround of Shakespeare.

Now it’s November 1961 and I’m (guess what?) unemployed. But at the suggestion of one of my coaching students I went to Greenwich Village to audition for a crazy one-act play to be shown in an Italian restaurant, met the owner-director, and six months later married him.

Meanwhile he produced *The Man of Destiny* for me, the first time I’d ever done Shaw. Alfredo Viazzi liked my being an actor. Growing up in Savona,



As the Queen in “*Once Upon a Mattress*,” 1964  
☛ photograph by J. Peter Happel



As Kate in “*The Taming of the Shrew*,” 1960  
☛ photograph by Lillian Photo Studio



*As Helen of Troy, 1963*

☛ photograph by Bert Andrews



*In "Coriolanus," 1965*

☛ photograph by Ned Snyder

Italy, he'd been a voluntary go-fer for the performers at the Teatro Cabrera, had published short stories in the same newspapers as his contemporaries Federico Fellini and Italo Calvino, had fought the war as an anti-Fascist partisan, and was a real feisty free-thinker. In the early years we both struggled with and against being tied to each other, but we lasted twenty-six years, until his death in 1987.

Here I am in 1963 playing Helen of Troy at the Circle in the Square. The Greek director Michael Cacoyannis took a huge and daring leap of imagination in casting me in this, but he said he wanted a "real woman" for it and was sick and tired of explaining to actresses what he meant by that! I would have crawled over hot coals for him, and I still would!

The entire summer of 1965 I was in Central Park again, in *Coriolanus* as the mother, Volumnia; in *Love's Labour's Lost* as the Princess of France and as Helen of Troy again, in *Troilus and Cressida*. I was feeling pretty good about myself for one of the few times in my life: I had the respect of my peers in the theater, the press was good to me, audiences responded, I got

an award for this work, and I finally had a persona: I was *a classical actress*. Of course, I still hardly made any money at all, which you don't in the classics in America. And a so-called friend called not only to congratulate me but to say "But they're all *white* parts, Janie!" I didn't mind. The truth was that, except



in the writings of learned theater scholars, I was never thought of as a black actress. There were no parts being written for anomalies. There still aren't.

In December of 1965, my husband and I left America and went to live in Rome, forever. We each had our own reasons for going, for staying two-and-a-half years, and ultimately for returning. But while it lasted it was for me magical and hard and dislocating and *freeing*. I was free there to lose most of my tensions and hostilities, to be simply a relatively young, black, beautiful and sexy woman with a talent who could kick up her heels without it having any deeper, more sociological significance for me or the audiences.

How about this lady, having discarded her classical shrouds, cavorting in Arthur Kopit's play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad* at a theater in Rome in 1966? (Jerome Robbins told me years later that he wished I had played it when he directed it on Broadway. He'll never know how desperately I wish it had even occurred to him.) And I had another epiphany. In Rome and then in Paris, I finally played a black role and had a kind of exhilarating coming-home to what my identity was, even though the role of an evangelist in a rural black Southern church setting was nowhere in my background. This all came about through the blandishments of another black transplant from the New York theater scene named Jay Flash Riley who had been touring the show throughout Europe and asked me to join it. He said to me, "I want to see this part played right and then I can die

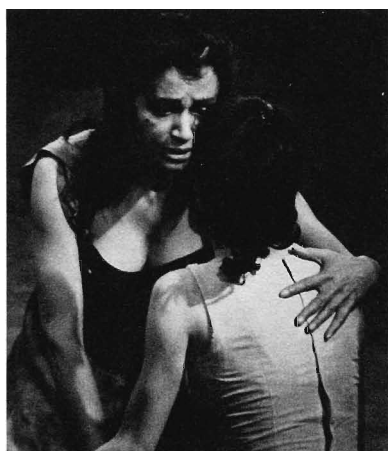


In "*Oh Dad, Poor Dad. . .*" in Rome, 1966 • photographer unknown

happy!" After Paris, at the Theatre Odeon, where a fan threw a blood-red rose from one of the boxes onto the stool downstage I had sat on and Jean Louis Barrault grabbed and kissed me and called me "a kind of genius," I said to Flash, "Well, now you can die happy" and he said, "No, no, baby, you made me want to live!"

But, as wonderful as Italy was, it was not my country, nor, it turned out, was it any longer my husband's. We were Americans.

And so we came home when I was asked to replace Irene Papas as Clytemnestra in *Iphigenia in Aulis* at the Circle in the Square in 1968. The newspapers greeted me as if I was Ulysses returning to Ithaca; I was on talk



As *Clytemnestra*, 1968

☛ photograph by Edwin Gann Snyder

shows with nervous hosts because this was Black Panther time; I went to parties; my name was above the title for the first time; I was wooed by Jules Irving of Lincoln Center and Ted Mann of the Circle to do any classic of my choice—and I did the stupidest thing in my life, which I'll always regret. I felt I was a modern woman now, ready to break with the past in all respects; I was forty-six years old and, before it was too late, I wanted a place in contemporary theater along with all its perquisites: stardom, status, and *money*—that wouldn't be so bad for a

change since it's the only thing that truly represents arrival in this country. So I chose to do a new play called *The Cuban Thing* about a Cuban family enduring through Battista to Castro, with Rip Torn playing my husband and Raul Julia our house servant. The play lasted one night on Broadway and was stink-bombed to boot! So much for changing one's image.... Sometime in here, Clive Barnes wrote in the *New York Times* that the legitimate theater hadn't been entirely fair to Jane White because she didn't fit any of the molds.

God knows in the last twenty-four years there have been many molds on display: Jane White browned-down to clarify things for American purposes on the 1968 PBS version of *Trumpets of the Lord*, which I had done in Paris

(this time around, with a young James Earl Jones in the cast); Jane White as a Madam in the film *Klute* with Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland; Jane White as the Queen in *Cymbeline* in Central Park (along with Christopher Walken and William Devane); Jane White as a mean nurse on *Edge of Night*; Jane White in clubs and cabaret; Jane White as Goneril in *King Lear* with Morris Carnovsky; Jane White as a New Orleans fortune-teller (and crook) on *Search for Tomorrow*; Jane White in a one-woman show called *Jane White, Who?...* produced by my beloved husband; Jane White as Clytemnestra again at the Williamstown Theater with Christopher Reeve, Blythe Danner, Ed Hermann, Celeste Holm, and a cast of thousands; and, in the Metropolitan Opera's centennial season of 1983-84 (at the special invitation of James Levine who said, "Jane White must be at the Met!") guest artist in *The Daughter of the Regiment* with Joan Sutherland and Alfredo Kraus, and in the role of Andromache in *Les Troyens* with Placido Domingo, Jessye Norman, and Tatiana Troyanos. I've been a Spanish mother in Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, the Norwegian Mrs. Alving, the French Eleanor of Aquitaine, the English Mrs. Higgins in *Pygmalion*, the German Story-Teller in *Brecht*, the black mother-in-law on the TV sit-com *Amen*, and yet another Roman Volumnia in *Coriolanus* at the Folger Theater in Washington.



As Goneril in "King Lear," 1975  
 ☛ photograph by Martha Swope



In the autobiographical one-woman show  
 "Jane White, Who?...", 1980  
 ☛ photograph by Nathaniel Tileston

I've been mother to three African-Americans (as we're *now* called) including Debbie Allen, to two Italians, four Latinos, two Irish, and eight assorted. I've learned thousands of lines, worn over 300 costumes and 40 wigs; I've been blessed to be asked to play Kate twice, Helen of Troy twice (in different plays), Clytemnestra three times, and Volumnia twice. And I've never *really* made any money. Nor have I become a star.

So why have I done it for forty-seven years even though I still feel so incomplete? It's not enough to say that it's one of the things all good actors feel.

What, in heaven's name, led this supposedly normal little girl to become an actress in the first place? If the emergence of a career in the theater seemed random and pure fluke, as I've even called it myself, it *wasn't*, not by a long shot! Somewhere, in my father's house, the idea of excellence and high standards and challenging pursuit were inculcated. Why then didn't I become a brain surgeon? No, it had to be something more public and *much* more difficult than that, something that would show the world and my father that I was valid and capable and, yes, even unique. But why do it the hard way? Why challenge America's entrenched concepts of what black and white are, thereby ensuring that my career would be troubled and in so many ways unsuccessful? Why didn't I just go away and do something else? If you think about it, all America's stars are people you know, types you recognize from among your friends or the images that advertising has thrust on us. No one is familiar with this woman. But then, I'm only sixty-nine. There's still time, if my legs hold out.

And in the meantime there's the *work*. I don't mean "the employment," when it comes, but the *art* in becoming women of quality and dimension and humanity on the stage, women who, in black or white face, make a difference to the world. They're not victims or buffoons or losers, but strong exemplars of womanhood.

A few years ago Frank Langella in "The Demon Seesaw Actors Ride," a wonderful article in the *New York Times* about the fears and self-doubt and uncertainty along with the occasional triumph all actors live with, wrote with greater eloquence than I can muster: "With each new role comes a test of heart, mind and spirit. Through the work an actor finds his place in society. Up against a task larger than himself, he can transform and overcome. More

than suffering, more than success, more than defeat, the work strengthens and illuminates. It calms the tremble. It steadies the seesaw.”

## CLOSING REMARKS

*Sarah M. Pritchard*  
*Director, Smith College Libraries*

✿ I have been given the perhaps impossible task of summarizing the complex and profound content of these four wonderful presentations. I can only offer a few insights scribbled down as I listened.

We have come together these two days to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Sophia Smith Collection. What that actually stands for is the recognition that the lives and histories of women are central to understanding our individual and collective histories and cultures. Without the careful and continuous collecting of papers, documents, photographs and objects—items whose value is not always obvious or whose form may be outside our traditional definition of such things—without this vigorous collecting, organizing, preserving, and ultimately publishing, we have very little basis for tracing, assessing, and interpreting these histories. We also recognize and celebrate the contribution made by women’s colleges, especially the unceasing pathbreaking of Smith College and the extended Smith community.

In following our theme of “Revealing Women’s Life Stories” we have had presentations of four such stories: those of Jane White, Mary Ritter Beard, Margaret Sanger, and Gloria Steinem. In fact we have had almost seven stories, because the study of biography has shown us that the pursuit of the biographer herself, the interaction between the author and the subject, is a story woven into this fabric. That has been very clear to us in the presentations we have had today. Each of these also has shown us the persistence of certain themes and analytical frameworks that have emerged over the past twenty years in the array of disciplinary perspectives known as women’s studies and feminist criticism, perspectives that have revolutionized our scholarship and the very resources we use for that scholarship in our libraries and archives.

Let me note (in no special order) a few of the themes I have heard throughout these talks:

✿ Our personal awareness of our own history, whether at the micro level, as Jane White presented it, or at the macro level in the way Mary Beard saw women’s history and how this history is shaped by our individual lives. In

becoming aware, we also see women's creativity in inventing themselves and telling their stories in the way they want to, given the needs of any particular situation. This reflects the critique that women have made of received knowledge and of the accepted definitions of self and society.

☛ The changes women go through in their lives and thinking; the recognition that there is not a single Gloria Steinem or a single Margaret Sanger and that we can see these multiple identities only by looking at different pieces of evidence over many years. A related theme is the changes scholars go through in interpreting these pieces of evidence, and thus the importance of the records we keep so that we can continually look back at them.

☛ The public aspects of women's accomplishments and actions, and the responsibility they assume for shaping their own and their public lives.

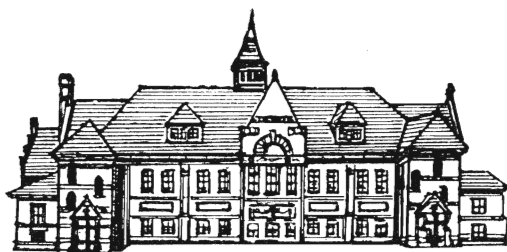
☛ The complications of sexuality, the social determination of gender roles, and the grave obstacles to women's full individual development and social participation in the form of racism, sexism, medical ignorance, and economic disadvantage.

☛ The differences in how we view women's political rights, women's personal lives, and women's social status. A woman may or may not identify with needs in these three quite different areas, but we must come to understand and evaluate the specific choices and strategies women adopt for their individual circumstances. These analytical frames demonstrate the complexity of women's lives and the shifting perspectives through which we must look at them.

☛ The realization that we cannot reduce any woman's life to a single story or theory, accepting instead the complexity of the interpretive variations that emerge and the need to look at the underlying assumptions of the interpreter. This realization illustrates the role of archives and, generally speaking, of documents. We must always be able to go back to the original sources and establish new linkages.

In a sense this celebration never ends. We actually celebrate every time we acquire new papers and new materials or every time an individual writer or researcher working with those materials reaches new insights and recreates women's lives and ideas through our collections. I was struck by one of the passages Ellen Chesler cited from Margaret Sanger, to the effect that women aren't allowed to toot their own horns. Today we have been hearing

that women are tooting their own horns. Let me thank all of you—our speakers, our students and faculty, our donors, the friends of the Sophia Smith Collection, and everyone here today—for your participation and for making this a truly memorable celebration.



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*The cover image is of Ellen Wright Garrison, circa 1905 ~~50~~ photographer unknown*