

Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/>

Phipps, Sheila. Review of Gillespie, Michele; Clinton, Catherine, eds., *Taking Off the White Gloves: Southern Women and Women Historians*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. The version of record is available at: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3867>

## **[Review of] Getting Down to Business**

**by Sheila Phipps**

**Abstract:** Book Review

Michele Gillespie, Catherine Clinton, eds. *Taking Off the White Gloves: Southern Women and Women Historians*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998. x + 187 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1209-2.

To mark its thirtieth anniversary, the Southern Association for Women Historians published this volume of lectures given by some of the organization's most illustrious members over the past fifteen years. *Taking Off the White Gloves: Southern Women and Women Historians*, edited by Michele Gillespie and Catherine Clinton, offers a look at both the scholarship and scholars of southern women's history, at the challenges facing both the women who lived the southern past and the women who attempt to uncover it.

According to the editors, the volume's title evokes a traditional fashion for southern women, who wore white gloves only when they were not doing manual labor, and symbolizes historians' task of "getting down to the 'unfinished business' of southern women's history" (pp. 1-2). Another cultural understanding of "taking off the gloves," however, is also subtly apparent within the collection. When a man was provoked into a fistfight, he would often take off his gloves and throw them to the ground, signaling to his opponent that he did not intend to soften in any way the impact of his fist upon the other man's chin. Not merely getting down to business, a pugilist who threw down the gauntlet was issuing a challenge. The same could be said for some of the historians represented in this volume, who dare other scholars to make use of all tools possible in order to include women in the southern story and make a place for women historians in the profession. The distinguished scholars who present their work in this volume are taking off their gloves, and some of them are throwing them to the ground.

The essays offered in this collection, which were all presented as lectures at SAWH or Southern Historical Association conferences, portray southern women's lives during several eras. In "Columbus Meets Pocahontas in the American South," Theda Perdue covers the colonial period by dramatizing the initial meeting of European men and Native American women. Columbus and Pocahontas, who of course never met, represent "invader and defender, man and woman" (p. 82). Perdue uses the device of a fictitious encounter to examine the misconceptions European men held of Native women based upon cultural expectations. Native women's clothing, adornment, and directness born of an egalitarian society signified for European men uninhibited sexuality. White men, blinded by sexual standards imposed by notions of ownership, could not see Native sexual prohibitions that were based upon spiritual beliefs and respect for the balance of nature.

Jean B. Lee's lecture calls for historians to shift from a telescopic to a microscopic focus in order to "Experience the American Revolution." Lee argues that the true experience of the Revolution has been remolded by successive generations until it has become "more imaginatively celebrated than authentically remembered" (p. 101). Nineteenth-century patriots used the Revolution to forge a nation splintering under the crush of change generated by industrial capitalism. Late twentieth-century historians have submerged the human story of the American experiment under lofty studies of ideology and debates over the social and economic causes of revolt. For Lee, the Revolution can be resurrected best by studies that are site-specific, such as her own work on Charles County, Maryland, an area shaped by the war even though no actual battles occurred there.

Catherine Clinton's "Sex and the Sectional Conflict" focuses on the "sexual politics" leading up to the Civil War (p. 44). As northern abolitionists stepped up their pressure against the South's stubborn retention of slavery, rhetorical debates between the sections increasingly used feminine metaphors to tinge the opposing region with weakness. In this context, Clinton argues, the South viewed northern abolitionists as unmanly individuals led by female reformers who had turned from their proper sphere to participate in public agitation, even speaking to "promiscuous audiences" of both women and men (p. 60). On the other hand, Clinton interprets John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in western Virginia as a sexual assault on a weakening South. Indeed, she asserts that the "sexualized language" adopted by the South to describe Brown's raid is evidence that southerners viewed his attack as a "figurative 'rape'" (p. 60). According to Clinton, Brown had to be executed for his crime "not in spite of but because of white southern admiration" for Brown's manly and courageous act (p. 62). Furthermore, Brown's crime against the South offered northern male abolitionists "an opportunity to break free of the feminization of abolitionism" and heralded the "dawning of an era of martial virtue" (p. 61).

Suzanne Lebsock's lecture on the suffrage movement in Virginia acquits southern white women suffragists of Aileen Kraditor's well-known charge of "expediency" and issues a lesser indictment of "not-so-bad" (p. 40).[1] For "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," Lebsock searched through suffrage meeting records and editorials in Virginia newspapers from 1912 to 1920, uncovering few racial arguments by either side in the suffrage debate. In fact, when race did surface in the dialogue, it was the antisuffragists who raised it, while the suffragists deemed "white supremacy...a bogus issue" (p. 34). In Virginia, as in the rest of the country, the suffrage "argument came straight from the national book," focusing on the rights and/or privileges of voting, rather than the argument that the votes of white women would counter black men's ballots (p. 32). Lebsock argues that Virginia's failure to pass either a

state suffrage amendment or the federal Anthony Amendment stemmed less from racism than from the state's "opposition to feminism" (p. 37).

Other studies in the volume reveal that even without the vote southern women have been politically active. *Taking Off the White Gloves* illustrates women's history's integrative approach to studying the past, blending economic, labor, political, and social history with oral history, literary analysis, and cultural history to find the half of the human story that has been missing. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's article, "'But She Can't Find Her [V. O.] Key': Writing Gender and Race into Southern Political History," is a prime example. Gilmore argues that a study of events leading to the armed attack against black citizens in Wilmington, N.C., in 1898 demonstrates that the rapid political fall of male white supremacists cannot be understood "until we write about" their experiences "by gendering and racing politics" (p. 127). When white supremacists editorialized their views that whites were superior, that black women were morally inferior, and that black men lacked the qualities necessary to vote responsibly, black women responded by not only refusing to show deference to white women but striking "back in the language of the streets" (p. 131). Unlike political historians such as V. O. Key, Gilmore argues that the white supremacists knew that "they did not act with impunity in a lily-white male world" (p. 134).

Mary Frederickson's essay, entitled "'Sassing Fate': Women Workers in the Twentieth-Century South," illustrates the use of both cliometrics and "life histories" to better understand the economic struggles of southern working women during the first decades of the twentieth century (p. 18). Analyzing the limited job opportunities available to both white and black women who rarely, if ever, enjoyed the luxury of wearing white gloves, Frederickson argues that these women slowly left agricultural and domestic employment to enter the industrial work force. As a backdrop to the women's rough working lives, Frederickson illustrates the conflicts these female workers faced in their personal lives, from living in poor conditions on subsistence farms or in cramped apartments to enduring abusive relationships. These very struggles, however, gave women familiarity with "survival strategies" that "primed women for collective action...when the opportunity to participate in collective protests" against unfair employment practices arose (p. 22).

In "'A Stronger Soul within a Finer Frame': Writing a Literary History of Black Women," Darlene Clark Hine urges historians of black women to be creative and flexible in their approaches. What Hine labels the "second wave" of Black Women's Studies understands that "it is no longer sufficient to add Black women" to existing scholarship "and stir" (p. 160). According to Hine, the field needs a framework dynamic enough to "clearly depict the 'soul' with all its complexity" (p. 159). Such a framework would make use of all forms of black women's expression, including autobiography, art, dance, quilting, body language, oral histories, and fashion. Even the way black women adorned themselves, Hine argues, loudly communicated their self-identification when their voices were threatened into silence. Hine urges us to listen.

One trend apparent in *Taking Off the White Gloves* is that when scholars find ways to locate women's experiences in the past, they discover innovative avenues for research and abandon the stale, dichotomous searches for right and wrong, good and evil, oppressor and oppressed. Instead, as these essays exhibit, the free use of historical imagination and close analysis of subtle documents shed light on the gray-shaded areas where human beings really live. Lebsack's analytical approach to the suffrage movement in Virginia, for example, helped her "rehabilitat[e] the reputation of the white woman suffragists" because she understood "that bad and not-so-bad are worth distinguishing from one another" (pp. 30, 40). Likewise, Clinton mixed

power and status with gender in her term "penarchy" to explain the control elite white men in the antebellum South had over not only women and blacks but white men of the lower classes as well. Lee's study of Revolution-era life in Charles County, Maryland, required her to apply several approaches, both traditional and social, to create "a coherent narrative of revolution and war" that included all segments of society (p. 104). Gilmore discarded the "Balkanization of history" that she believes is separating subfields and obscuring the gray-shaded areas of the past (p. 139). Her willingness to study less-chronicled incidents leading up to the Wilmington massacre "expand[s] the site of political places where African Americans practiced resistance" to public sidewalks, thus applying cultural anthropology to a political history of the postbellum South (p. 139).

Another thread unifying this volume is "the insistence by so many of [the] authors that the personal is political" (p. 4). Although true of the scholarly studies, this maxim is even more apparent in the lectures that focus on women's efforts to gain a place in the historical profession. Virginia Van Der Veer Hamilton's piece, "Clio's Daughters: Whence and Whither," begins with the rather droll observation that at least women historians have been granted the title "historian" and haven't had to fight off a label like "historianness" (p. 64). Hamilton's look at women's entrance into the profession begins with Mary Beard, who, although an academic in her own right and one of the first to apply an integrative approach to historical research, was considered merely her husband's assistant by his peers. Hamilton goes on to discuss "the academic wife as typist," proofreader, illustrator, researcher, and ghost-writer (p. 70). These wives, Hamilton argues, were "like sharecroppers...perform[ing] hard physical labor on someone else's property" (p. 70).

Women's entrance into the profession was difficult, stymied by the gender-based assumption that academe was "too hard on a woman's nervous system" and "they can't take the pressure" (p. 72). As Hamilton notes, however, the pressure was stepped up a few notches for the women who tried. Work that women did had to be their "absolute best," not just "passing quality" (p. 74). In graduate programs, grade discrimination faced even those whose work rivaled that of male students. Once women did obtain teaching positions, their own gender assumptions often impeded their professional lives, as many "felt obliged to defer to male peers" (p. 75). Women faced salary discrimination and were often thwarted in their attempts to serve as department chairs because faculty did not believe "that first-class male scholars could...be recruited by a female department head" (p. 76). Challenges such as these "burned themselves" into Hamilton's nervous system, and, fortunately for the profession, she found the strength to overcome them (p. 74).

Likewise, Anne Firor Scott's "Unfinished Business" examines women's historical consciousness. Women who understood that their experiences had historical significance -- such as westering pioneer women, women who suffered through the Civil War, and women involved in the suffrage movement -- began to record their personal histories. The first female scholars who, in the 1920s and 1930s, began to write histories of such southern women, however, met with little acclaim. Despite "excellent" work, "theirs was an area not yet recognized by the gatekeepers as a legitimate field of study," writes Scott (p. 118). That would have to wait until the 1970s, for the young female graduate students who "had been exhilarated and energized by the civil rights movement." In Scott's view, historians of southern women have advanced professionally up to the present, as "the field continues to grow both in substance...and in theoretical sophistication" (p. 119).

Carol Bleser's "Tokens of Affection: The First Three Women Presidents of the Southern Historical Association" complements the professional retrospectives of Hamilton and Scott. Bleser honors the three women who first pushed past the "gatekeepers" and gained recognition in the field of southern history, exemplified by their election to the presidency of the SHA: Ella Lonn (1946), Kathryn Abby Hanna (1953), and Mary Elizabeth Massey (1972). Although only Massey worked in the subfield of southern women's history, all three women broke down barriers that had slowed women's entrance into the profession.

As this volume illustrates and Scott argues, since women have entered the profession in great numbers "women's history has followed a separate track from the grand narratives of the American past created by male historians." This brings us back to the metaphor of taking off the gloves and throwing them to the ground as a challenge. None of these scholars shows any reticence about declaring where adjustments to traditional scholarship need to be made. Nor are the historians shy about the way they phrase their opinions of past mistakes. In response to Kraditor's thesis that white women suffragists leaned to the right to gain support, for instance, Lebssock answers: "Of course the suffrage movement made itself more respectable; you do not get the Constitution of the United States amended by calling yourself a bolshevik" (p. 30). Lebssock argues that there is a wide range between right and wrong, including actions on the path to political expedience. For her part, Lee also throws down the gauntlet, squarely facing off against the "near obsession with the role of ideology" in studies of the American Revolution and dubbing the debate over ideological origins "the kudzu of Revolutionary scholarship" (p. 102). Perhaps the volume's most outspoken challenger to a dichotomous approach comes from Gilmore. She laments that the sad assumption that southern white males existed in only two classes -- elite and yeoman -- was propagated by Wilbur S. Cash, who "ironically...ignored the man he was: an urban, middle-class reporter harnessed to wage labor by a New South rag; a commuter, living with his mamma" (p. 137).

Despite the rich scholarship and fine humor displayed in *Taking Off the White Gloves*, the collection suffers from a few problems. Since the articles are arranged chronologically by the dates the speeches were delivered, the focus of scholarship seems rambling, with the eras out of sync. This causes some confusion. It would have been more coherent if the chapters had been organized into parts, with research lectures organized chronologically by topic in one section and the professional perspectives in another.

There are also times when southern distinctiveness, promised in the introduction, is missing. For instance, Frederickson does not make clear what is distinctively southern about the financial problems faced by the women in her study, other than that these women moved out of an agricultural economy later than women in the Northeast. Throughout the country, women who struggled economically early in the twentieth century faced similar difficulties. What, besides timing, made southern women's challenges distinct? The same can be asked of Lee. What was distinctively southern about the Revolutionary-era experiences of Charles County, Maryland? Since one-third of the population has been considered "disaffected" by the Revolution, it is likely that communities in northern colonies experienced similar transformations.

These are minor complaints about a volume that has a great deal to offer. What better way to celebrate thirty years of the Southern Association for Women Historians than to display the work, methods, criticisms, and professional struggles of some of the most distinguished

scholars in the field? Any student who intends to focus on this specialty would be well served to read *Taking Off the White Gloves* first. Although many of the volume's exhortations to approach southern women's history from a new perspective have been taken up, the book still provides a wealth of exciting ideas for innovative scholarship. *Taking Off the White Gloves* demonstrates that the work of southern women's history is being accomplished by making use of any and all available tools, just as Gerda Lerner proposed a quarter of a century ago.[2]

#### Notes

[1]. Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965).

[2]. See Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975): 5-14.