

[Reclaiming the Library Past: Writing the Women In, edited by Suzanne Hildenbrand \[Review\]](#)

By: James V. Carmichael Jr.

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Hildenbrand, Suzanne, ed. *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1996. 324p. \$59.50 (ISBN 1Ablex, 1996. 324p. \$59.50 (ISBN 156750-233-4); paper, \$24,50 (ISBN 1-56750-234-2).

For nearly a decade, feminist writers have been calling for a more radical analysis of women in the work force, and nowhere does the need seem to be greater than in librarianship, Nel Noddings' review of feminist thought in education, social work, teaching, and the "male" professions is singularly silent about librarianship¹; Christina Baum's content analysis of feminist writings in librarianship classifies most of them with liberal rather than radical thought²; and Roma Harris' warnings about the devaluation of caring as a professional tenet in librarianship have gone more or less unheeded.³ Although at least one notable historical monograph on the contributions of library women has appeared since 1986, its purpose is not didactic.⁴

A continuing problem for women historians is that the basic (probably male) historical conventions have to be bent to accommodate herstories. Historical prejudices have served to exclude many aspects of "women's work," both within and without the field, and the present volume serves admirably to fill in some of these gaps, notably in the areas of volunteerism (e.g., women's clubs), services to children and youth, special collections, African-American librarianship, land- grant college librarians, and regional leaders. In addition to biographical and prosopographical essays, there are several more sweeping overviews that challenge assumptions about pay equity, women's role in the intellectual freedom struggle, and library school snobbery. The collection is undoubtedly the most important feminist volume to appear in librarianship since Kathleen M. Helm's pioneering anthology, now thirteen years old.⁵

As Suzanne Hildenbrand notes in her aptly titled introduction, "From the Politics of Library History to the History of Library Politics," individual case histories are a prerequisite to any more radical theory, Hildenbrand conducts a selective but rigorous review of the field of "gendered" history and provides a rationale for herstories (the much- maligned historical case study or biography). Her essay serves as perhaps the best primer to date on the theoretical framework of feminist historical analysis in librarianship.

The herstories that make up part 1 of the volume cover figures both familiar and unknown. Certainly the centerpiece of the entire collection is Clare Beck's reassessment of the career of Adelaide Hasse (1868-1953), best known as the originator of the classification system for government documents. Beck concentrates on Hasse's later career, however, and particularly her activism at the New York Public Library (NYPL) after 1897. Her antagonistic relationship with the board of trustees, and especially with NYPL librarian Edwin M. Anderson, her relentless championing of higher wages for women workers, and her militant advocacy for woman suffrage (not to mention her long-standing friendship with controversial Los Angeles librarian Tessa Kelso) present perhaps the clearest (and certainly a rare) picture to date of a representative of "first wave" feminism. It is a riveting biographical essay, shocking in some of its revelations of bureaucratic (mainly male) pigheadedness.

Georgia Higley describes the contributions of early female librarians of the western land-grant colleges, two of whom, Ida Kidder of Oregon Agricultural College and Charlotte Baker of Colorado Agricultural College, were so popular with students and townspeople that they became known as Mother Kidder and Ma Baker. In those halcyon pre-Freudian days, such eponyms conveyed the esteem in which these women were held. Higley gives numerous examples of remarkably energetic librarians who almost single-handedly transformed land-grant libraries from seedy collections of miscellany housed in stifling, cramped, and leftover spaces into foci of university life. Higley suggests that those librarians who succeeded best were those who made the land-grant collection a vital part of the intellectual life of the state through extension service. In a similar vein, Linda K. Lewis chronicles the accomplishments of a nonprofessional university librarian, Julia Brown Asplund (1875-1958), a professor's wife and club woman who became the first woman in New Mexico to serve on a state board, to serve on the board of regents, to lead a suffrage parade, etc. Asplund was more active in regional and state library associations than the national association, yet she established state extension service, the library commission, and surveyed school libraries in the state—the basis for later legislative funding. Her example gives lie to the prejudice that marginalizes the biographical import of subjects who were not nationally recognized leaders, and without more such "regional" biographical studies, an accurate account of women's contributions may never be made.⁶

Anne Lundin's reassessment of the career of Annie Carroll Moore (1871-1961)—protégée of Carolina Hewins (1861-1961)—protégée of Carolina Hewins and the founder of children's services at the New York Public Library—is written in full recognition of her fatuous image and lionized status (thanks mainly to adulatory previous biographies) and recognizes her "irritating" (p. 197) eccentricities. Lundin is perhaps the first biographer to fully articulate Moore's greatest contribution to librarianship: the validation of advocacy as an essential component of library work.

Three essays deal with the female librarian as intellectual, bibliographer, and collector. Clara Sitter's account of Fannie Elizabeth Ratchford's (1887-1974) literary detection in uncovering the Thomas J. Wise forgeries at the University of Texas (and in later proving that he did not act alone), and her fundamental and world-renowned work in Brontë scholarship, has been told in part before,⁷ but the full biography suggests that female scholarship generally has been discounted in the profession. Helen H. Britton's chronicle of the career of Dorothy Porter Wesley (1905-95) of Howard University, albeit largely a respectful enumeration of honors and achievements, raises more questions than it answers about how gender power was negotiated in African-American university libraries. Also, details of Wesley's seemingly miraculous ability to raise money for collections remain hidden in this account. More successful is Glendora Johnson-Cooper's treatment of Jean Blackwell Hutson's (1914-) career with the New York Public Library in developing the Schomburg Center for Black Culture; Johnson-Cooper takes into account the many conflicts with administrators that plagued Hutson's career. The essay is based largely on interviews with Hutson that are not fully documented—thus underscoring the need both for oral history and for proper citation of interviews when documents are lacking—and leaves nuggets for further and fuller investigation (e.g., Hutson's challenge of segregated housing at the University of Michigan before 1929, p. 30). The author's inattention to precise dates is also worrisome, as is the inexplicable digression into African cultural values of a later period (p. 40). The essay could have used a stronger editorial hand ("centered around," p. 47), yet is invaluable for bringing black feminism into the mainstream of library history.

Four broader essays make up the second and final part of the volume, entitled "Professional Issues." Noted library historian Joanne Passet argues persuasively that librarianship is the most marginal of the "feminine semi-professions" and demonstrates that library educators and librarians sent and received conflicting messages in establishing acceptable salary levels for librarians. She effectively argues that "as the missionary phase of librarianship passed ... librarians derived less satisfaction from the work" (p. 215), due partly to the rising cult of consumerism but also because, more often than before, financial need rather than altruism predicated their employment. Christine Jenkins challenges the assumption that women more often than men were censors, and she bases her conclusions on a sweeping review of the literature of censorship as well as a finely detailed analysis of the membership rolls of the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC). Jenkins' knowledge of youth

services serves her well here, for she relates perceptions of the female as censor to the large number of male administrators on early IFCs and the predominantly female constitution of the school media and youth services fields. Barbara Brand focuses on the largely neglected history of the Pratt Institute Library School, an essentially progressive and non-elitist alternative to turn-of-the-century library education: There Mary Wright Plummer pioneered education for children's librarians, and Josephine Rathbone carried forward the tradition after Plummer joined her brother-in-law Edwin Anderson at NYPL. In particular, Brand provides a scathing and long overdue criticism of the male bias inherent in the Williamson Report of 1923, attacked vigorously by Rathbone at the time. The second section concludes with a very strong and wide-ranging essay on women's volunteerism in libraries by Cheryl Knott Malone, who makes perhaps the most convincing distinctions in the historical literature between volunteerism as it was originally conceived in women's organizations and the current trend in budget-driven management mandates for volunteers and larger numbers of paraprofessionals, which continues to blur professional distinctions and undermines professional status. The last section of the book alone would merit the price of the volume, for along with the Hildenbrand essay, these are indeed among the most sophisticated and comprehensive feminist historical essays to date. The herstories of part 1 only add to the value of the collection. The volume belongs in all professional collections and university libraries and deserves to be read more widely than such collections usually are.

References and Notes

1. Nel Noddings, "Feminist Critiques of the Professions," *Review of Research in Education* 16 (1990): 393-424.
2. Christina D. Baum, *Feminist Thought in Librarianship* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1993).
3. Roma M. Harris, "Gender, Power and the Dangerous Pursuit of Professionalism," *American Libraries* 24 (1993): 874-76.
4. Joanne E. Passet, *Cultural Crusaders: Women Librarians in the American West* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Pr., 1994).
5. Kathleen M. Heim, *The Status of Women in Librarianship* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1983).
6. Margaret A. Corwin first made this point in "An Investigation of Female Leadership in Regional, State and Local Library Associations, 1876-1923," *Library Quarterly* 44 (1974): 133-44.
7. Richard Altick, *The Scholar Adventurers* (New York: Macmillan, 1950; reprint Columbus: Ohio Univ. Pr., 1987), 37-64, 312-17 (page citations to both editions).