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2012

Review of Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World

Emily Bruce

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Albisetti, James C., Joyce Goodman, and Rebecca Rogers. **Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World: From the 18th to the 20th Century**. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2010.

When notoriously paternalist Napoleon established schools for soldiers' daughters in 1805, he was hardly motivated by a desire to emancipate women; nevertheless, these institutions did advance the education of the girls who enrolled. Rebecca Rogers's discussion of this example highlights contradictions in the history of girls' secondary education seen throughout this valuable new collection. Editors Albisetti, Goodman, and Rogers have brought together experts for eleven chapters on most regions or countries in modern Europe, as well as two concluding chapters on transnational dynamics. With a focus primarily on the history of policies and institutions, the authors provide rich details on significant schools and educators, the development of the state system and private education, and the colonial sphere. The editors refuse to flatten regional and temporal differences into a single definition of secondary education, but generally the focus is on formal schooling of middle and upper-class girls between ages 12 and 18. Each chapter is historiographically dense, providing a comprehensive guide for those teaching or researching a topic related to girls' schooling in a particular country. But the book's particular virtue lies in the patterns which emerge from placing the national cases side by side. This comparison reveals not only dramatic differences in girls' secondary schools according to particular historical context, but also the ways in which girls' schooling has served conflicting interests.

Reading these chapters in concert outlines a common trajectory in the history of girls' secondary education. Despite variations in timing and the players involved, a pattern in the western world developed from Enlightenment debates over the virtue of educating girls, followed by battles between secular and religious educators with state reforms in the late nineteenth century, and eventual demographic changes in the expansion of coeducation after WWII, though gendered visions of youth and education nevertheless persist. Another almost universal feature is the role of domesticity: advocates for girls' secondary education often made arguments based on the importance of educating mothers for nation and for empire. However, religious, political, and cultural differences created wide variations in how that education was envisioned.

National differences seen in a comparison of the chapters are even more illuminating. For example, pronatalism could work for or against the cause of girls' secondary education depending on the political context. What was emancipatory or desirable in one place was not necessarily true everywhere: Juliane Jacobi's chapter demonstrates that in Germany it was difficult for girls to gain access to the gymnasium, the most elite stratum of secondary education and gateway to the university, while Simonetta Soldani explains that in Italy it has been the vocational schools which

particularly excluded girls, making it difficult for them to receive professional qualifications. Consuelo Flecha suggests that the early prohibition of coeducation in Spain effectively shut out girls' schooling since resources first went to boys' schools. And yet, early acceptance of coeducation in the Netherlands largely prevented women from becoming teachers, which, Mineke van Essen and Hilda Amsing argue, also limited secondary education opportunities for girls. Among the most interesting national variables is religion, which did not have predictable results. Competing confessions in Ireland, Belgium, Greece, and Bulgaria actually drew more attention to girls' schooling, as a battleground of religious conflict. As might be expected, in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, Catholicism acted as a conservative force often limiting girls' education, while in France, liberal currents within Catholicism as well as the *laïcité* debates encouraged innovation. However, one crucial intervention the authors make is to caution us against a simpleminded appraisal of northern Protestantism as progressive and southern Catholicism as conservative: for example, in Italy and Spain, some students used the absence of dedicated girls' schools as a loophole to gain admittance to classical schools intended for boys.

Each chapter presents a valuable survey of the defining characteristics, the state of scholarship, and unanswered questions for a particular national historiography, but three deserve special mention. E. Thomas Ewing's essay on Russia is notable for his attempt to bring out the agency of female students themselves in the transformations of secondary education. Rogers's study of French girls' education argues compellingly that a myopic focus on the state struggle for girls' schools that imitated boys' curriculum neglects significant achievements of earlier women teachers who pursued an alternative model. Agneta Linné's overview of Scandinavia is especially attentive to informal and home instruction, a major component of girls' learning that is out of reach for most of the volume.

Taken as a whole, this collection goes beyond synthesizing previously scattered research on girls' secondary schools. The editors' attention to Enlightenment debates and early nineteenth century models is a much needed corrective to earlier studies of secondary instruction which only begin with state reforms at the end of the nineteenth century. Many of the authors comment on how pedagogues imagined girls—fragile, needing protection from “overstrain,” requiring intellectual refinement over rigor—though the point that schooling was a key institution in constructing this gender ideology deserves more attention. Once again we see how biological age intersected with gender and class to constitute the meaning of childhood and youth. Among the book's most significant contributions are the unanswered questions it raises for future research, especially concerning informal or home education.

The clear, national organization of this book has some disadvantages. Comparative and transnational features of girls' secondary education receive less attention, though they are among the most interesting points. For example, Albisetti's

discussion of differences between European and American definitions of secondary education clarifies what that experience was like for girls on both continents. Indeed, it is in this crucial contribution of investigating nationally specific variations in girls' secondary schools where the book encounters a limitation: the problem of assessing what these policy changes and institutional developments really meant for the girls enrolled. Thus the book indicates a new direction for wedding the history of girlhood and the history of education, by continuing inquiry into girls' own learning experiences and perspectives—scholarship that will be supported by the strong foundation provided in this collection.