Models of Girlhood

LAUREEN TEDESCO


How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present. By Alison Booth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 30 halftone illus. Pp. xvi + 424. $95.00 (cloth); $25.00 (paper).

Three recent recovery projects in women’s and girls’ culture offer intriguing possibilities for further work in girlhood studies. All three uncover rich resources of neglected publications or archival materials and freshly complicate historical readings of nineteenth-century views of women’s role and potential. While none focuses on girls or girlhood alone, each offers a context for interesting work on girls’ lives and literature.

Sarah Bilston’s The Awkward Age in Women’s Popular Fiction, 1850–1900: Girls and the Transition to Womanhood reads images of adolescent girlhood in women’s and girls’ novels of the latter half of the nineteenth century, discovering in its wide range of literary and popular sources diverse and conflicting ideas about the challenges that confront girls between the schoolroom and marriage. Bilston finds that the affectionate and tolerant midcentury representations of girls in the in-between stage prepared readers at the fin de siècle for similar portrayals in the New Woman novel of adults who resisted conventional definitions of themselves and sought a broader theater for their talents than the home.

Similarly, Alison Booth’s How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present discovers a prefeminist focus on strong female role models for nineteenth-century women in more than nine hundred British and American collections.
of brief biographies. The group biographies that proliferated in the nineteenth century represent a lost wealth of information on nondomestic role models for women. The texts that Booth examines quite frequently targeted girl readers and suggested a wide range of nontraditional ways of conducting an exemplary woman's life. Although they praised the domestic woman, collective biographies also lauded women's agency outside the home, in institutional reform, dramatic rescues of men, exploits in battle, and literary or artistic prominence. Booth effectively shows the connection between these nineteenth-century biographical collections and contemporary attempts to recover forgotten "great" women writers and historical figures. Many of those recovered today, Booth demonstrates, were already well-known in the nineteenth century through the myriad ambitious efforts at resurrecting the "forgotten" lives of worthy women. Booth provocatively paints the urge to find a supposedly lost history of women as a self-repeating play somehow necessary to each generation.

Rebecca Rogers's From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France also recovers from the past a wider range of messages about women's roles than has previously been recognized. Examining girls' training in a setting that ostensibly sought to reproduce domestic womanhood, Rogers complicates images of French schools for middle-class girls in postrevolutionary France. She draws on a wealth of archival materials, school records, and government reports to dispel historians' impression that French girls were schooled primarily in domesticity and that nuns taught them only to be docile and home focused. She examines educational treatises of the period to show that debates about the content of French girls' education emphasized their need for training in reason as well as in home management and credited the bourgeois woman with extraordinary power to regenerate French moral society. Rogers ably counters the generalizations of earlier scholars, demonstrating that girls could encounter both mediocre and demanding academic programs of study in religious or lay schools and that the "family life" that they were prepared for extended into the public sphere through charity work, vocations such as teaching, and public performance of their artistic talents. She pays particular attention to the figure of the schoolmistress and teacher, both within and outside religious orders, arguing persuasively that lay teachers and nuns demonstrated extraordinary resource and initiative, offering an example that was, at times, contrary to the "approved" message of compliant feminized (and married) Christianity.

All three of these books open up new texts and models of strong women – real and fictional – and question earlier monolithic portraits of nineteenth-century views of domestic femininity.

The most impressive of these ambitious attempts at revisionist history or literary history is the close rereading of French girls' schooling in From the Salon to the Schoolroom. Rogers presents her beautifully documented argument in three chronologically arranged parts: "Reconstructing Girls' Education in the Postrevolutionary Period (1800–1830)," "Women, Schools, and the Politics of Culture (1830–1880)," and "National and Political Visions of Girls' Education." The book is usefully arranged to demonstrate historical trends expressed in a few representative examples, placed in the context of published debate, and its clearly presented theses are nicely tracked for the reader. The first two parts trace developments in education for girls following regime change in France – from just after the Reign of Terror (1793–94) to the July Monarchy (1830–48) of Louis Philippe (1773–1850). Each part considers its period's public debate about girls' schooling before devoting one or more chapters to teacher ethos and practice within the private schools that developed apart from the few state-supported institutions for girls. In chapter 1 of part 1, Rogers explores the published expressions just before and after the French Revolution of what bourgeois education for girls should entail, using chapter 2 to describe the schools that existed under the prerevolutionary monarchy and those that developed in the early years of the Republic, after the state closed religious schools. Despite the ideal of maternal education espoused in French writing about girls' education, "women teachers and pedagogues staked out a space for girls' education that was not solely located in the home" (p. 12) and contributed to later expansions of women's role beyond the home sphere.
Part 2 dedicates its first chapter (chap. 3) to the published debate on girls' education in the period 1830–48 and spends three additional chapters (chaps. 4–6) on the types of teachers and schools available in the period, examining teachers as professionals and independent women, teaching nuns as women with vocations, and boarding schools as sites for developing a female identity. As in part 1, here Rogers creates a dialogue between prevailing notions of the purpose of girls' education and prevailing practices among the many and varied schools. While dominant voices insisted on women's desirability in the home, Rogers finds that her "analysis of girls' education in France between 1830 and 1880 has emphasized a trend toward professionalization among teachers and an increasing focus on examinations within schools" (p. 194), a response, perhaps, to the arguments of Catholic clergymen and women writers that "good' mothers needed more 'serious' education" (p. 106).

Part 3 similarly weighs the period's theorizing about education against examples of typical practices. Its first chapter (chap. 7) summarizes the legislative debates on and the vigorous campaign in the periodical press for reform in girls' education in the 1860s and 1870s, the result of which was the nation's first state-supported network of secondary schools for girls (p. 221). The educational discourse of this period still emphasized girls' future as wives and mothers, but vocational training and the development of normal schools offered them a wider range of options and pointed toward greater civic freedom for women. Chapter 8 examines French models of girls' education from an international perspective, using Catholic and lay schools in Africa, England, and the United States to gauge the peculiarly French features of the education that developed in the hundred years after the French Revolution. Rogers comments: "While many French bourgeois women continued to aspire to lives of contained domesticity, others had learned that their empire no longer was the home; it had acquired an imperial dimension that allowed them to live on foreign soils, explore the characteristics of other cultures, and impart their vision of woman's proper place, a vision that bore little relation to the lives they actually lived" (p. 258). Lucid and intriguing, Rogers's well-supported explication of middle-class French girls' education models the best type of revisionist feminist history.

Most compellingly, Rogers credits lay teachers and nuns with presenting to French girls a wider range of female identities than has been previously acknowledged. She delineates the professional accomplishments of career women educators and teaching nuns, who established schools throughout Paris and in other French cities and, thereby, "carved out an institutional space for women whose implications have yet to be explored" (pp. 80–81). She identifies running a boarding school as a career that enabled some French women to reposition themselves in a higher social class; drawing on licensing records, she demonstrates that, by midcentury, more than half the schoolmistresses came from lower-middle-class or working-class families and seemed to have married up the social scale or used their schools to advance their social position (p. 130). However, because lay teaching carried with it the stigma of the bluestocking or the money-hungry careerist, Rogers posits the lay teacher as hiding her professionalism under a domestic mask so that she could appear appropriately feminine (p. 110). That conformity to domestic appearances has, she argues, kept historians from "appreciating[ing] the extent to which the laywoman teacher emerged as a professional figure in the mid-nineteenth century" (p. 114). She finds in religious teaching orders opportunities for women to define themselves spiritually and professionally apart from marriage and motherhood in a socially sanctioned choice (p. 110).

The book's occasional editing oversights — including problems with possessive plurals — can be attributed to the impressive size of Rogers's project and to her having translated much of the supporting material from the original French. The book's three maps, showing the clustering of girls' schools in particular regions of France, are difficult to decipher, however, because the key decodes only some of the varying-sized squares representing numbers of schools. Apart from this minor inconvenience, scholars of girlhood in any nation should find Rogers's insights helpful and can appreciate her interweaving of bourgeois girls' history with national development.

How to Make It as a Woman represents an equally substantial project, synthesizing the
rhetorical patterns in more than nine hundred English and American works of collective biography. Booth carves out as her subject English-language works that present at least three women’s life narratives and were published “between 1830 (when middle-class women’s movements and publishing practices became more efficient) and 1940 (before the postwar publication boom produced too many volumes to tally)” (p. 2). She relies on but extends Sybil Oldfield’s annotated bibliography of almost four hundred books, adding American works because they reflect the transatlantic publishing trade’s “international exchange of subjects and social movements” (p. 2). Referring to How to Make It as a Woman as “a book on centuries of recovery projects” (p. 278), Booth asserts: “Although these early popular collections require ideological decoding today, their effort to recuperate women of the past seems, oddly enough, never to go out of style... while generation after generation laments the absence of women of the past” (p. 3). The presence of prominent women writers as contributors to this genre suggests that they “regarded it as continuous with other forms of social service in which they might engage, perhaps as an incremental advancement of civilization through influence on the reader” (p. 56). Despite its weighty presence on academic library shelves, Booth’s material is new to contemporary readers as a subject for study rather than reference, and her approach to it is fresh and insightful. The recursive arrangement of her argument and the repeated placement of her project within larger contexts, however, grow tedious by the end of the book.

Booth classifies all her biographical subjects as types, replicating in her own book divisions the collections’ titles and chapter headings, which group women’s achievements in sweepingly inclusive categories such as “Heroines in Times of Peril” and “Succourers in Days of Distress” (pp. 94–95). By examining the most popular subjects in these all-female collections, she demonstrates the conflicting messages offered to readers of these works, a genre that she dubs “self-help history” (p. 61). Typical of these works is the adjacent presentation of women of a wide array of virtues and vices: “The Victorian horizon of gender ideology evidently was broad enough to encompass the beautiful assassin Charlotte Corday alongside Joan of Arc, Hannah More, Pocahontas, Queen Elizabeth, and others in a collection titled Lessons from Women’s Lives” (p. 4). In her introduction, Booth demonstrates the recuperative nature of collective biography, or prosopography, the practice of identifying people by the characteristic masks they wear. As she surveys the subjects in these volumes, she notes the very public, active, and often dangerous nature of the heroines’ exploits and discovers in the discourse a message antithetical to the domestic ideology sometimes espoused on the surface, as the works could “endorse a surprising range of women of different social origins and circumstances,” often “express[ing] the desire to honor neglected heroines of hearth or mission field, or the victims of racial, class, or other prejudice” (p. 11). Booth sees in this literature a broader range of life patterns for nineteenth-century women than in critics’ usual resources, the novel and the conduct book (pp. 272, 5).

Chapter 1, “Self-Help History: Presenting Models of Womanhood,” demonstrates the collective biography’s designs on the reader. In this and subsequent chapters, Booth offers patterns of collective biography, identifying such standard opening moves as apology, exemplification, and construction of the reader, observing that presenters simultaneously justify and apologize for their exclusion of particular admirable women, use one heroine to exemplify a type, and shape the reader through exhortations and commentary on the lives discussed (p. 54). Chapter 2, “Heads Turn, Heads Roll: Heroic Types from Judith to Clara Barton,” explores women “heroes” as subjects, including women participating in war and assassination and women in male garb rescuing their husbands or fathers. Booth underscores the drama of women interposing their bodies between their men and physical danger as well as their triumph over decapitated, “prostrate[,] or dead men” (p. 90). Chapter 3, “How to Minister as a Woman: The Likes of Elizabeth Fry, Mary Carpenter, Dorothea Dix, and the Three Mrs. Judsons,” examines missionaries and women who championed prisoners, the illiterate poor, and the mentally ill, demonstrating these subjects’ active engagement in the public sphere. Because their...
humanitarian projects drew on women's maternalist mission, their public work and their confrontation of male bureaucrats receives approving commentary in the texts (p. 137). Chapter 4, "The Lessons of the Medusa: Anna Jameson and Mutual Multibiography," examines the career of the collective biography compiler Anna Brownell Murphy Jameson (1794–1860), who not only resurrected the lives of admirable women in her eleven prosopographies but also became a subject of collective biographies herself. Booth observes that, beneath her self-effacing rhetoric, Jameson used feminist strategies in her narratives, denouncing the sexual double standard and women's exploitation, and "anticipating familiar kinds of feminist writing, from 'images of women' to gynocriticism to feminist social history, folklore, and even comparative religion" (p. 181).

Chapter 5, "The World's Fair Women; or, Racial Progress in the Nineteenth Century," considers the racial politics of collective biographies, discussing the general exclusion of women of color from those texts that sought to use women's achievements as evidence of the advanced civilization of a nation or race (the Anglo-Saxon or white European one). African American prosopographies published in 1893 challenged African American women's exclusion from the Woman's Building exhibits at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and from typical collective biographies of the day (p. 213). Chapter 6, "Writing Women's Lives Revisited: Virginia Woolf and the Missing Canons of Biography," uses Virginia Woolf's (1882–1941) A Room of One's Own (1929) as a model of the contemporary act of despair recounted by feminist scholars searching for lost predecessors. Booth finds similar dramas of the recovery of literary ancestors performed by contemporary scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Carolyn Heilbrun. Chapter 7, "Our Queen Victoria: Feminist Prosopography," examines the fallen and now risen fortunes of Queen Victoria as a subject of biography and feminine admiration. Deconstructing recent depictions of Victoria as a lost subject who needed recovery, Booth finds in nineteenth-century approbation of the queen the curious contradictions of the collective biographies she examines: "So representative that she is hard to distinguish, Victoria is ultimately far from alone, a spectacle witnessed by all the world. . . . The queen appears as though in a stereoscope that pairs the close-up of a domestic middle-class woman with the outline of a global force" (p. 264). Throughout her book, Booth uses lively, self-aware language to carefully contextualize her project and to align her material with contemporary cultural patterns in striking ways.

Like Booth, Sarah Bilston finds a more expansive view of Victorian womanhood than has previously been recognized, by reading about sixty overlooked novels about girlhood in tandem with canonical and frequently studied works. She identifies a tradition in the later nineteenth century of depicting "the awkward age," the period of transition from girlhood to adulthood, as a space for experimentation with one's identity and rebellion against gender norms. For Bilston, the figure of the transitional girl - at odds with her mother, full of undirected energy, grappling with the sexual and economic realities of marriage using the limited knowledge she is given - is a precursor to the New Woman as presented in women's novels of the 1880s and 1890s and offers writers of those decades a literary model for the freedoms they explore.

In her introduction, Bilston sets her work against earlier studies of Victorian girlhood, most notably Carol Dyhouse's Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, which suggested that Victorian culture offered girls no intermediary or adolescent phase, as we would understand that period today, in part because women were, essentially, treated as permanently adolescent (p. 3). The awkward age - the period between leaving school and marriage, which among middle-class girls was seen as extending from age fifteen to age nineteen - was characterized as fraught with danger and possibility. Bilston writes: "It may seem to us that a Victorian girl's options were hopelessly circumscribed, but contemporary commentators regularly described the transition to womanhood as a time of great personal and social significance, a tumultuous period of dramatic possibilities and unproven potential." While marriage marked a girl's social maturity without allowing her further space for change, "a host of women writers effectively countered such notions of maturity-as-wifehood by plotting and charting the
transition to womanhood as an emotional, psychological experience" (p. 6). Like the pre-adolescent characters Anne Scott MacLeod discusses in her landmark essay "The Caddie Woodlawn Syndrome," transitional girls had, according to Bilston, latitude that women were denied: "The transitional girl's rebellious frustration with her enclosed life was regularly portrayed with warm sympathy" (p. 7). Resisting the critical urge to find subversion in the more conservative texts she studies, Bilston observes that those texts express an ambivalence about gender roles that was quite compatible with Victorian familiarity with doubt and that appeared across political alignments (p. 20).

Chapter 1, "'Launched into the Ocean of Life': Navigating the Transition to Womanhood in 1850s Fiction," examines advice literature about the dangers of transitional girlhood and didactic and romance novels that explore the possibilities of energetic, dissatisfied girlhood before safely installing their girl heroines in marriage or useful singleness. A central theme of this chapter is the absence or inadequacy of the mother as a catalyst toward self-determining adulthood. Chapter 2, "'At the Very Turn of Life' in 1860s Fiction," sets Eliza Lynn Linton's (1822–98) "The Girl of the Period" (1868) against fictional representations of girls in their late teens making crucial decisions about their life direction and moral mission. She examines sensation novels, figuring "a heroine's troubles transitional stage with a narrative of obscured or mistaken identity," and romance novels that present marriages as disrupting rather than cementing girls' acquisition of maturity (p. 70).

Chapter 3, "The Transitional Stage: Theatrical Girlhood in 1870s Fiction," examines theatricality in portraits of transitional girls and in novels about the theater. Performance could be positively coded as expressing "a young woman's authentic inner self" and "invariably encouraging a fresh investigation of the limits imposed on the energetic, active, and forward-looking young woman" (p. 111). Chapter 4, "'Coming Out': Passages to Womanhood in British and Anglo-Indian Fiction, 1880–1894," examines novels about British girls' colonial experience in India, demonstrating that such novels depicted the India of the heroines' imagination as a place of liberty and scope for action. Such novels posit "surprisingly progressive polemic about young girls' need to escape Britain and its repressive social mores" (p. 153). Once they have migrated, however, the girls discover themselves still trapped within "the same notions of family-bound femininity in Anglo-India as in Britain" (p. 167).

Chapter 5, "On the Threshold: Female Adolescent Experience in Fiction of the Fin de Siècle," unites late-century portraits of transitional or adolescent girls with emerging images of the New Woman. Bilston finds the themes of the New Woman novel drawing on the tropes of earlier nineteenth-century fiction about the transitional girl: "mother/daughter conflict, identity confusion, frustration with home life, a longing for public action, dissatisfaction with marriage" (p. 175).

Arguing that James is "a famously unreliable commentator on his own work" (p. 222), Bilston claims a larger space for the novel as drawing together strands of argument from half a century's women's literature.

The "new" texts that Bilston has uncovered and her resistance to flattening the views of nineteenth-century women into one or two camps are especially valuable. At times troubling, however, is other flattening she does, as when she presents didactic texts as automatically Christian (Maria Edgeworth [1767–1849], although outside the period that Bilston studies, offers an obvious example of a secular didactic writer) and fails to note the impact of Charlotte Yonge's (1833–1901) Tractarianism on her notion of gender (she is presented as simply "Christian"). She also seems to flatten out decades to a small range of concerns; one wonders whether the texts and focus can fit so neatly into a ten-year span marked as a numerical decade. Further, one wishes for closer readings of some of the more familiar texts considered (such as Yonge's The Daisy Chain [1856] and The Clever Woman of the Family [1865]); misgivings about some claims made about them make one wonder about claims made about less accessible texts. Still, Bilston offers some intriguing juxtapositions of texts that should send many of us back to the primary sources for a closer look.
Similar themes emerge from Booth’s, Rogers’s, and Bilston’s works. All three discover a wider range of “domestic” identities offered to nineteenth-century women than has previously been appreciated. All three, as well, treat the concept of emulation, although Bilston does not give it that name (she talks, instead, about the need for a female guide, expressed in 1850s didactic novels about girlhood). Bilston deals the most with explicitly children’s texts, including girls’ magazines such as The Girls’ Own and The Girl’s Realm, but Booth refers to well-known children’s authors who participated in the genre of collective biography (e.g., Charlotte Yonge and Lydia Maria Child [1802–80]) and mentions a number of such texts addressed to girls, including Sarah Knowles Bolton’s (1841–1916) Lives of Girls Who Became Famous (1886, with nine new editions through 1949). Rogers, too, turns briefly to girls’ literature, using moral children’s literature of the post-revolutionary period to illustrate a French concern for reshaping family life. All three works under review here point to texts and cultural developments that should foster further provocative work in girlhood studies. Booth and Rogers contribute the most in modeling useful methodologies and uncovering overlooked resources that other scholars will take delight in examining.

NOTES


2. Booth offers a series of related definitions, quoted from a range of sources, for a collective definition of the term prosopography. After glossing biography and autobiography as genres that celebrate missing persons and “anthropomorphize lost time,” she writes: “I like the daunting polysyllable ‘prosopography’ for the very reason that it seems to mourn the loss of the missing.” She further draws on Paul de Man’s observation that prosopopoeia “give[s] a face, mask or voice to an absence” (p. 12). Booth notes: “As the root association of person with ‘mask’ suggests, the image of a face or body plays an important part in these collective representations” (p. 13).
