Women in History Books

The Case of the Missing Sex

by Marcy Fink

History textbooks - which supposedly help high school students obtain an "objective" appraisal of history - are actually overwhelmingly biased. "History" is exactly that — *HIS* story, not "hers." According to Phyllis Arlow and Merle Froschl in *Women in the High School Curriculum:*

> *The typical U.S. history textbook devotes one out of its 500 to 800 pages to women, their lives and their contributions. Where women are included, they appear under separate headings, in special sections, even on different colored paper. They are made to appear supplemental — as postscripts to history rather than an integral part of it.*

A few women are routinely included in the standard texts. Clara Barton, Betsy Ross, Pocahantas, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, and Eleanor Roosevelt are typical examples, but the contributions of most women are consistently omitted. Is this an intentional omission of women whose views were too radical to pass the textbook screening committee? Possibly; but it is just as likely that those omissions are simply a reflection of the treatment of women in society. Men are included simply because their activities are considered more important. Among women, those who conform to stereotyped images of feminity are most likely to be mentioned.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Researchers Arlow and Froschl reviewed fourteen history texts. They noticed various similarities in the treatment of women. In illustrations, for example, they observed that pictures, photographs, and paintings were almost exclusively of male subjects; women included most often were the "wives" of important men. When women were the central figures of an illustration they were usually treated condescendingly. In a section entitled "The U.S. Becomes an Industrial and Urban Nation," the accompanying photograph portrayed a well-dressed woman on the phone in an immaculate modern kitchen with the caption "Electric kitchens liberated many women from the drudgery of housework." (Their husbands certainly didn't.)

MINORITY WOMEN

Minority women are almost totally absent from texts. The researchers found *no* mention of Native American, Puerto Rican, Chicana, or Asian women. The inclusion of black history does not allow for the discussion of black women (except briefly Harriet Tubman) and their relation to the abolition or suffrage movement. There is no mention of the specific degradation and achievements of black women. The struggle by black women like Sarah Douglass and Katherine Ferguson to set up schools for black children is omitted. Names such as Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells, Mary Church Terrell, to name a few, are rarely included. Issues relating to contemporary black women are also excluded.

SEXISM IN LANGUAGE

The sex bias found in language also predominates in texts. Phrases like "...men head West" do not encourage mental images that include females, so young readers are likely to imagine that only men created history;

> *Men had to do things for themselves or with the aid of a few scattered neighbors....In the end, men and their institutions were adjusted to the demands of the American continent.* (American History)

WOMEN — 1700's TO THE PRESENT

Four main areas were looked at to assess how textbooks portray women in history: the colonial period; the rights and reforms movements; women and work; and contemporary America. You might want to compare the criticisms made here with the amount of coverage given to women in your history textbooks.

The role of women in early America is ignored. Textbooks make it seem like America was exclusively a "man's world." Look at this example from *Rise of the American Nation*, a commonly used text;

> *The farmer's lot was not an easy one. He and his sons had to get up at daybreak — and even earlier in the winter — to milk the cows, bring in the firewood for the stoves, feed the hens and pigs, and fill the water for the livestock.* (The Rise of the American Nation)

Important women are usually mentioned in relation to their husbands:

> *Lewis and Clark, benefited by having with them a young Shoshone, Sacajawea, wife of the interpreter Dorion.* (History of the United States)

In one text, the only woman mentioned for the colonial period was Abigail Adams. She wasn't noted for her writing and letters on reform, but as "Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams and mother of Quincy Adams."

The contributions of women during the colonial era were certainly equal to those of men. Probably in no other era since then did women participate so extensively in what have been called "men's activities." Yet they are *still* excluded from the picture that students get.

More information appears on the women of the late 19th century reform movements than in any other period. Coverage is still superficial and brief. Some male-sponsored summarizing statements about women as reformers are so ridiculous they could make you laugh, — or cry!

> *The organized feminist movement arose earlier in the United States than in any other nation not because American women enjoyed so few privileges, but because they had so many that they demanded more.*