

# Book Review

- Bonnie G. Smith. *Women in World History: 1450 to the Present*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Pp 336. Index. \$30.95 (paper).

When I read Bonnie G. Smith's *Ladies of the Leisure Class* (Princeton, 1982) in college, I saw how historians can apply social science insights and feminist theory to an empathetic reading of the mundane spaces women infused with meaning. As a child of the poverty class, I still recall marveling at Smith's ability to convince me that the placement of silverware in a 19th century bourgeois home was worthy of study. It changed my career. As a French historian who gradually pivoted to world history, like Smith, I learned to draw broad conclusions about women's lives without getting lost in the discrete variables that always qualify, if not undermine, such generalizations. Indeed, her new book, *Women in World History: 1450 to the Present* follows from her two massive edited collections, the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* (4 volumes, 2008) and *Gender History* (Bloomsbury, 2018). A reviewer for *Choice* wrote that *Gender History* "should find its audience among scholars and serious students rather than casual readers and belongs on the shelf at academic institutions. It especially addresses specialists seeking to expand their knowledge to less-well covered parts of the world (namely the majority of the planet outside of Europe and North America)."

*Women in World History*, on the other hand, is written for general readers and students, including advanced high school students. Although the introduction defines key concepts like patriarchy and points out historiography's omissions, the book in general is straightforward narrative history with few complicated arguments, references to scholarship, or theoretical positions. While Smith risks overwhelming the reader with details, she places each name, event, and story in a coherent organizational structure. Organized thematically, Smith inserts women into a fairly conventional chronology, making the book a suitable companion to world history survey courses. It could also serve as the basis for an advanced course in women's history, while segments could be used to include women's history in courses on imperialism, revolution, or globalization. Each of the twelve chapters includes headers every two-to-three pages, allowing readers to digest the material in small chunks. Each of these subsections explores a discreet topic in comparative context, usually illustrated by specific examples. Each chapter concludes with a few summary remarks and a handful of glossary terms and suggested readings.

Smith extends to the globe an approach taken by Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser in *A History of their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* (Oxford 1988), a two-volume masterwork describing women's lives according to their place and function. This approach is especially helpful in the first half of Smith's book where events span centuries instead of decades and drove women's experiences less than in the modern period when globalization hastened the pace of change. Like Anderson and Zinsser, she emphasizes continuities over ruptures, only the latter of which have been of interest to conventional historians. Indeed, Smith decries history's omissions on the first page. "The history taught in school makes it appear as if there was an entirely male past of warfare, 'exploration,' industrial development, and innovation followed by more warfare" (1).

Although Smith could simply insert "women worthies" into such conventional approaches, she prefers to pay more attention to poor women than to women leaders and more to culture than politics. With chapters on reproduction and imagination, we read about coming-of-age rituals in many cultures, for example, including genital cutting, a practice that "embedded that stage of life in community ritual not in an individual self," as soon as page thirteen. Lacking specific geographic and chronological markers, these rituals are rendered as timeless and placeless, even ahistorical, a choice some authors would avoid. But lack of specificity helps keep the reader engaged and highlights the cross-cultural similarities in women's lives. Nor does she use these examples to illustrate any larger argument about patriarchy, thus maintaining a relatively neutral stance on controversial topics and enabling readers to decide for themselves. She explicitly eschews the victim/agent dichotomy by stating simply in the Introduction: "Whether women have agency or whether they are following a script of rules and regulations is an issue to consider as you read about women's history in the pages ahead. You the reader may decide for yourself" (7).

Like many world histories, Smith's book features Asia prominently, with many specific entries for Japan and China, and few for specific countries in Africa or Latin America, although examples are sprinkled throughout that the index may not capture. While this reader wishes for a better balance here, the book is not Eurocentric, not only as measured by index entries but by its structure and approach. Even where European modernization is the implied driver of globalization in the 19th century, it gets little attention as such. Instead, Smith tells the story from the Japanese perspective over several pages in a chapter on "The Lure of Modernity," working in mentions of Mary Wollstonecraft and the French Revolution without breaking the focus on Japan (188). Over the next couple of pages, she continues to explore women's adaptations to the forces of modernization by discussing the Cherokee, Egypt, the Taiping Rebels, and ends off with a section on the nation by returning to Japanese reformer Utako Shimoda . . . via Harriet Tubman. Thanks to prose that is lucid and matter of fact and to a commitment to avoid overdetermining simple stories, Smith helps keep the reader focused on the general point the examples are meant to illustrate.

She also manages to allow some space for considerations of men and masculinity without diluting her focus on women. For example, when describing the Great Depression and the rise of “authoritarian saviors,” Hitler is mentioned only briefly and Mussolini and Stalin not at all. Instead we learn of the specific experiences of poor women in Nigeria and Mexico and are treated to the *Reminiscences* of Joana de Masi Zero, a Brazilian factory worker who appreciated the rule of dictator Getulio Vargas. “They say he was a dictator, but for us he was good” (251).

Because of her commitment to including diverse women’s experiences into five centuries of world history, Smith assumes some familiarity on the reader’s part with more general events and ideologies. For example, Aleksandra Kollontai is one of the few people to get sustained attention, nearly two pages, but she has to work for it: it is through her that readers will learn about Marxism, Feminism, the First World War, and the Russian Revolution. Instructors can provide more context, especially when topics are even less familiar to American students. In Chapter Two, “Imagining their World,” brief mentions of Hindu and Mesoamerican goddesses risk reinforcing their exoticism. Reaching further back chronologically to include the *Arabian Nights* and *The Tale of Genji* from around 1000 crowds the chapter and renders the general point about women’s creativity ahistorical. It also tends to freeze cosmology and religion in time, as neither gets mentioned again once our attention is directed to the modern era. Instructors could intervene by assigning excerpts from the sources themselves, or at the very least, by raising students’ awareness of the benefits and risks of minimizing particularistic context, a precondition for the project of world history.

Despite these issues inherent in the genre, I remain in awe of the undertaking represented by *Women in World History: 1450 to the Present*. I plan to assign all or some of it in every class I teach; its approach and catalog of examples will equally inform my scholarship. Only a scholar of Smith’s stature could pull this off. With forty years and as many publications to her credit, she is truly a master of the literature and a highly skilled writer. Just as she did in *Ladies of the Leisure Class*, Smith continues to do what few can: depict ordinary women’s lives empathetically, reminding all of us that the placement of the silverware matters as much to world history as the politics of importing it or the ecological impacts of its manufacture.

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