

Narrating Women's History In Britain: 1770-1902

Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, in her book *Narrating Women's History In Britain: 1770-1902*, is creating a history of women's history. This history falls into a field known as historiography. In the introduction to the book, Burstein defines women's history as “any study of women that analyzes changes in their social position and agency over time” (Burstein 1). Interest in the origin of women's history dates back to the 1970's, where scholars like Natalie Zemon Davis and Kathryn Kish Sklar were doing work in the field¹. Burstein begins, literally in the first sentence, by asking when exactly did women “find their own histories?” (1). Was it in the 1960's? How about the 1970's when Davis and Sklar were writing? Could it be traced back to Greek historian Plutarch, who Burstein mentions in an aside?

Without giving an immediate, definitive, answer she continues by asking another question: how should women's history be cataloged? Do male authors count? Does it have to be a “radical,” feminist, or alternative history? When she began researching historiography, Burstein writes, she thought women's history would be broken down into two categories. There would be an “alternative” history of the private, domestic, and feminine, and a “mainstream” history of the public, political, and masculine (1). The work of women like Davis and Sklar argues that women wrote “from the margins,” outside of the mainstream, public, masculine, record (2). If women wrote from outside the mainstream there would always be some sort of political twist to it. These standards, for Burstein, would not hold up very well upon further examination.

During her research, Dr. Burstein finds that women's history is not quite as invisible as

1 Burstein notes important articles written by Davis and Sklar including *Gender & Genre: Women As Historical Writers: 1400-1820* by Davis and *American Female Historians In Context, 1770-1930* by Sklar.

Davis and Sklar believe. She finds three major flaws with Davis and Sklar's argument. The research of women's historians has often been only focused on women. As Burstein points out, before the nineteenth century this was primarily only a practice of males. During the Victorian period more women became involved, but men still worked in the field. To deny the place of male historians as somehow being anti-feminist or “inauthentic” is “seriously misrepresenting the available evidence” (3). Second, due to the massive amount of plagiarism and illegal reprinting during the Victorian period, the desire to seek out an authentic feminine, or masculine, voice is not a worthwhile expedition. The example Dr. Burstein uses for this is *The History Of Female Sex* which plagiarizes its contents completely from Lord Kame's *Sketches Of The History Of Men*.²

The third reason for women's history not being invisible is the desire to hold women's history to a “strict feminist rubric” more often than not neglects the values of the Victorian period and the multiple religious, and cultural, allegiances citizens would have had at the time (3). This, according to Dr. Burstein, unfairly lumps all non- proto-feminist, whether male or female authored, writing into the category of “men's history” (4).

As her research continues, Burstein realizes that women's history is not that difficult to find. She argues that women's history was one way of analyzing the mainstream:

By the end of the nineteenth century, readers could have taken their pick of several hundred books and articles in English, ranging from philosophical analysis to scandal-mongering narratives. It soon became clear that, far from being an “alternative” practice, writing about women in history was one of several ways of analyzing the *mainstream*: the progress of civilization, the spread of

2 Burstein does not note the “author” for this text anywhere in the introduction or bibliography.

Christianity, the rise of British nationhood. (2)³

The next logical thought process is, given the popularity of women's history, is it even a radical act? For the majority of the nineteenth century, historical scholarship was not done by professionals. It was created by men “outside the academy,” including the philosopher David Hume, for the most part (4). The history chairs at Oxford and Cambridge were given to writers or clergymen such as Charles Kingsley.

Later in the introduction, Burstein writes about a “crisis in historical writing” (8) This crisis is the fragmentation of history. Burstein gives a few reasons for the fragmentation. There was a fear of narrative fragmentation. A goal of writers and readers during the period “was to clarify the casual connection among events” (8). The fresh access to the archives of sources like the Vatican and the Public Records Office caused anxieties about verifying even the most basic of “facts” due to the amount of contradiction that began to surface. A united historical narrative became virtually impossible to create and is, in the opinion of Burstein, a “morally questionable act” (9).

Many people, even some men, worried about this. She notes that Thomas Lister commented on Sir Walter Scott by wondering if an accurate reading of “premodern” women would threaten the “moral and aesthetic sensibilities” of Victorian readers (11). Reacting to the movement towards women living lives of “uneventfulness,” Julia Kavanagh, a Catholic novelist, historian, and biographer, also wrote “when men liberate nations and win realms, their names live forever...who shall count the multitudes these Christian women redeemed from misery?” (11) All of this said, in conclusion to the introduction, Burstein concludes that “authentic” masculine and feminine behavior only appears at very specific times and places.

3 Burnstein's emphasis in italics.

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For *Narrating Women's History In Britain: 1770-1902*, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein seems to be using an interdisciplinary approach to her research and book. The subject of Burstein's book is the history of women's history, which is also known throughout the introduction as women's historiography. Before looking into Dr. Burstein's work, I did not really know much about historiography before, but did have a bit of experience reading theorists like Hayden White and Michael Foucault who seem to be working in similar groundwork at times according to my understanding of the material. Burstein's work could, potentially, be categorized under the field of Cultural Studies. As I read and reread her introduction however, something just doesn't feel quite right about that label. It seems that due to the vast landscape Burstein is looking at and variety of unusual sources she is incorporating into her study, Cultural Studies might not be the proper label for her work. Burstein is certainly, and most likely unarguably, a feminist and is doing a feminist study, despite her criticisms of past scholars in the field like Davis and Sklar.

At the end of the day, I believe it best to label this a well done feminist study of women's historiography. Personally, but perhaps I am misunderstanding the field a bit, I have never been totally comfortable with the narrowing of material many of the articles I have read in the Cultural Studies field incorporates. There is a time and place, to always be celebrated and defended, for scholarship that only involves the thoughts and writing of women. The vast issues of gender power and privilege need to be, of course, taken into account as well. Cultural Studies has a vast and proud tradition of doing so. Nevertheless the lack of, as Burstein argues in her introduction, material from male authors or masculine sphere focused writers seems to be a

great mistake. Burstein's incorporation of male writers, historians, and associated masculine, public, sphere material is refreshing and necessary. It is thoughtful and intelligently defends her thesis and arguments about women's historiography. The placement of males is well done and not overblown to fill some sort of asinine "quota" of male writers. Nor is the contribution of proto feminist and other women writers reduced to make up for some sort of imaginary "reverse" gender bias against men. Hopefully, in the years to come, others will follow Burstein's example accordingly.

I do find flaws with *Narrating Women's History In Britain: 1770-1902*. For someone, like me for instance, who isn't an expert in Victorian fiction or women's historiography sometimes it is difficult to follow just what and where Burstein is talking about. Many of the references she makes are to rather obscure texts that even scholars might not have knowledge of. Nevertheless, I don't think Burstein should have to "dumb it down" so to speak, but this book assumes a previous, and, honestly, advanced knowledge of the Victorian period's literature, gender relations, and historiography. If I did not have a previous interest in Burstein's work, this would not have been a book I'd have picked to do work with. Academics and students with an interest in the Victorian period will be much more comfortable with the material I am sure. My own issues should not deter anyone else away from it. But the laymen would probably not want to tackle this one.

Narrating Women's History In Britain: 1770-1902 lays the groundwork down for a variety of studies to follow. I would be curious to read more about the incorporation of Victorian male writing into feminist scholarship on the period. The wide variety of sources cited offers many different scholars an opportunity to enrich their own work. The bibliography, with more

than two hundred primary and secondary sources, could be essential material for some researchers and thesis writers. The endless amount of explanatory footnotes often point to more than one source for more information about any number of issues Burstein brings up. I wish more scholars approached footnotes like Burstein does.

Lastly, I believe the philosophical issues Burstein brings up in *Narrating Women's History In Britain: 1770-1902* make for interesting classroom discussion and debate. I could envision a professor who is teaching a theory course assigning this introduction to be read when discussing the political alignment and motivations of scholars. Burstein defends feminists and those involved with Cultural Studies and women's historiography while also criticizing them in an intelligent manner. The issues she brings up can broadly be used in other fields to enrich classroom discussion and bring forth lively debate about the matters at hand. Even if the only use is for classroom debate, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's introduction to *Narrating Women's History In Britain, 1770-1902* is an important text that many academics will find necessary to engage with and ponder further.

Works Cited

Burstein, Mariam E. *Narrating Women's History in Britain, 1770-1902*. 1st ed. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004.