Book Reviews

Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920, by Anne Ruggles Gere. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xii, 367 pp. Notes, index. $42.50 cloth, $18.95 paper.

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With *Intimate Practices,* Anne Ruggles Gere makes a major contribution to our understanding of the historical significance of women's clubs. She does so both by expanding our vision of who was included in the women's club movement and by refocusing our attention on the aspects of the movement that its creators considered most important.

As befits her professional status as an English professor, Gere focuses her attention on texts—those studied by women's clubs, but even more importantly those inscribed by clubwomen as they sought to establish an identity for themselves. Those texts, Gere is keenly aware, were created in a context. She begins most chapters with a key mainstream text that defined issues that clubwomen sought in their texts to redefine. In addition, clubwomen were constantly compelled to define themselves in reaction to images of them in the mainstream (male) media. The irony, Gere concludes, is that despite the readily documented contributions of women's clubs to American cultural life at the turn of the century, those male images are the ones that have prevailed not only in popular culture but in the general historical literature on the period.

Whereas most students of women's clubs have noted that the club movement was dominated by white, middle-class, Protestant women, Gere provides extensive treatment of African-American, Jewish, Mormon, and working-class women's clubs, comparing and contrasting their goals and practices and the images they constructed of themselves with those of white, middle-class, women's clubs. Significantly, she notes tensions within each of the minority groups between those who sought to conform to or aspire to white, middle-class norms and those who found ways to legitimize their own unique contributions to American culture. By contrast, Gere's portrait of white, middle-class clubs is disappointingly static and monolithic. The articles in this issue of the *Annals of Iowa* reveal that divisions among clubwomen were not always along race or class lines.

These two concerns—for recognizing the diversity of the club movement and for acknowledging the self-image of clubwomen inscribed in their own texts—shape each chapter's treatment of key cultural issues in the turn-of-the-century United States. In chapters one and two Gere juxtaposes clubwomen's views on urbanization, immigration, and industrialization with those inscribed in the Immigration Act of 1917 and in Josiah Strong's *Our Country.* In chapter three, the commercialization of *Ladies' Home Journal* provides the occasion for an interesting contrast between the commercialization of individual authorship and the clubwomen's focus on writing *for the club.* Although interesting, this chapter's failure to fully engage recent studies of the emerging consumer culture is disappointing.

Chapter four ranges widely in showing clubwomen's responses to media critiques of the "new woman." Whereas those critiques portrayed the "new woman" as undermining motherhood, clubwomen joined in linking the two concepts. Clubwomen, for example, used the ideology of motherhood to promote peace and woman suffrage. Clubs also provided a safe place to debate such issues without jeopardizing social relationships. The Chicago Exposition, where clubwomen shared information with each other, represented an opportunity for them to enhance their sense of themselves. There and in other forums both white and African-American women revealed the ways they identified themselves racially.

It is easy to see how clubwomen supported and popularized genteel culture—and Gere shows as clearly as anyone the ways in which they performed that function. But she also shows, particularly in chapter five (perhaps the richest and certainly the most dynamic chapter), the ways clubwomen stretched the prescribed standards being imposed by that culture at the turn of the century. Their respect for lived experience led clubwomen to advocate a more relativistic notion of culture. For working-class, African-American, Jewish, and Mormon clubwomen, the meaning of culture created contested terrain. They divided between those who "embraced the genteel tradition as a means of entering the larger world . . . and gaining acceptance" and those who "recognized that culture as defined by white middle-class society could not be wholly theirs or serve socially defined needs" and who therefore "sought more positive textual representations . . . of themselves and saw their self-culture as a way to claim and reshape the genteel tradition" (193, 197). White middle-class clubwomen embraced the genteel tradition because "it affirmed their social position and conferred high status" (200). They also used it "to distinguish themselves from others and exert power over them" by defining standards. But even they expanded the tradition by including women writers, by focusing more on a culture of personality than a culture of character, and by promoting culture as a communal as well as individualized experience. Chapter six extends the arguments of chapter five to the ways clubwomen adopted, adapted, and resisted turn-of-the-century academic methods and canons in literary studies.

Finally, in chapter seven, Gere tries to explain why the major contributions of women's clubs to American cultural life have gone largely unacknowledged. She concludes that as the institutional life of women's clubs declined after World War I, there was no one to defend the self-image of women's clubs against the negative stereotypes set out in the mainstream (male) media. "The substitution of image for memory," she concludes, "served the national ethos because it erased the *processes* by which cultural change was effected at the turn of the century" (268). That erasure of memory, she says, was the final, essential step in incorporating the fruit of women's clubs' cultural work into the ongoing national life.

This book has several strengths. Perhaps the greatest strength, in addition to the two themes more clearly evident in this review, is its capacity for showing the "intimate practices" of reading, study, discussion, and presentation of papers within club meetings as of one piece with the more explicitly "public" work of the clubs. Gere's identification of women's clubs as one of a number of competing publics, rather than a product of "separate spheres," is helpful here. Her deliberate effort to give equal voice to clubwomen from a range of social locations enables her to bypass the debates over *who* clubwomen were. And the result of her close reading of clubwomen's texts is a focus on how clubwomen defined *themselves* (though, in keeping with recent trends in literary criticism, with attention to social location). That effort recognizes women as active agents in constructing the identity and ideology of women's clubs in response to cultural constructs that they both shared or affirmed and resisted. I would have welcomed more attention to particularities of place and to issues of continuity and change over time, but that would have been difficult to accomplish while maintaining its strength of recognizing the diversity of a movement while still interpreting it through a focused lens.

Intimate Practices is a model monograph. Its structure, with each chapter focused around three or four themes that advance the general thesis, gives the book a predictability that is a considerable strength (as a scholarly tool) but also a weakness (as a reading experience). Making excellent use of an impressive range of secondary literature blended with her close reading of primary texts, the author displays considerable theoretical sophistication (with only occasional lapses into the jargon of contemporary literary criticism) that enables her to successfully illuminate the mundane activities of these "(extra)ordinary women." I recommend it highly.

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