

sexes develop, but they are not the primary focus of my work.

There is a fundamental difference as well in the philosophical assumptions underlying the two books, as Foster implies in his response to my review in his use of the somewhat clichéd metaphor of the two perspectives on a glass of liquid. Indeed, basic assumptions about human nature inform all historical accounts and have provided the basis for some of the more acrimonious disputes among the practitioners of the discipline. To the extent that our interpretations of the sources and our various readings of historical reality are conditioned by our fundamental responses to man and his motivations as an historical actor, we all fall somewhere along a continuum stretching between a Pollyanna-like optimism on the one end and a Chicken Little pessimism on the other. Certainly my vision of individuals involved in these communal experiments is more pessimis-

tic than Foster's, but that should not be allowed to obscure the fact that in many ways our two books are complementary since the difference between them is not simply a matter of personal point of view but rather a question of looking at the same phenomena from different angles of vision. When one person has a mule by the head and another by the tail, they frequently disagree as to the general nature of the animal. Each is convinced that the other is largely mistaken about the characteristics and behavior of the beast. That seems to be the case here. But such disputes are ultimately fruitless. If each of our books in its own way contributes to an ongoing historical inquiry into the nature of these communities and sparks others to further investigation, it will not have been written in vain. It is now for others to describe this communal animal from unique perspectives that will reveal other aspects and provide alternative interpretations of its essence.

How She Did It

"A Good Poor Man's Wife": Being a Chronicle of Harriet Hanson Robinson and Her Family in Nineteenth-Century New England. By Claudia L. Bushman. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981. 276 pp. \$18.00.

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In the summer of 1979, the Modern Language Association, with financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, sponsored a five-week institute on "non-traditional writings of women." The institute was held at the University of Alabama, directed by Leonore Hoffmann, and taught by three full-time faculty plus many one- or two-day

lecturers, including Florence Howe of the Feminist Press, Kate Stimpson of *Signs*, novelist Toni Cade Bambara and many others. By discipline, the faculty and guest lecturers were historians, literary critics, specialists in oral history, literary theorists, folklorists, poets, novelists and publishers. The "student body" for this high-powered group consisted of twenty-five university professors from across the country, of whom I was one. All of us together were trying to wrestle with one knotty problem: just what should be the position of the "non-traditional" writings of women? What is the place of journals, diaries, letters and oral histories in the accepted literature of a culture? Where do books like Claudia Bushman's *"A Good Poor Man's Wife"* fit in?

Such kinds of writing have been, in the past at least, the most common material written by women. So in one way, it is incorrect to label these materials "non-traditional." They are, for women, quintessentially traditional. But—and here's

where the MLA institute came in—these letters and diaries and “odds and ends” have never been part of the *traditional canon* of literature. That is to say, they have not shown up on college reading lists. They are rarely mentioned in classroom lectures. Scholars have not dedicated their lives to the study of these materials, as they have to the peculiarities of the *Pearl* poet, the dating of Shakespeare’s folios, the themes of Blake, the psychology of Melville, the symbolism of Lawrence, the structure of Sartre. For decades and for centuries in English-speaking colleges and universities, certain genres have been traditional, respected and accepted without need of defense: the drama, the poem, the essay, the novel, the work of literary criticism and, more recently, the short story. Diaries, letters and journals were important (a) if they shed light on a notable figure, or (b) if they were stylistically interesting in and of themselves. Such letters and journals were usually the work of prominent male writers (there were almost no female writers in print) or of women closely allied to prominent male writers.

In the last fifteen years or so, however, as a result of much hard work by feminist scholars, a central truth has emerged: though women have seldom *published*, they have always *written*.

We cannot here go into the history of women’s publication, but suffice it to say that even when women overcame the enormous barriers and put good material in the hands of a publisher, if that material were *known* to be by a woman, it was rarely published. (In the middle of the nineteenth century, the situation started to change, but almost entirely at the popular or commercial level, rather than at the serious literary level.) But, even when the idea of publishing a book or a poem was the furthest thing from their minds, women *still wrote*. And what they wrote were letters (the number of letters women wrote a hundred years ago would astonish us today), diaries and journals.

Because men published, we know how men, or some men, thought and felt. Our understanding of the workings of the human heart, which is what we seek from our writers, came almost entirely from the male side of the family tree. On the other

hand, because women published so rarely, we have, in the *traditional canon*, little record of what the female half of the race thought and felt. But the diaries, journals and letter collections recently discovered (the jargon term is “excavated”), we now have access to material that tells us how women thought and felt, what they did with their lives, what the shape of their days and years was. Literary scholars, historians, cultural anthropologists, feminists generally and all women interested in knowing about their former-day counterparts have rejoiced over the wealth of information becoming available through these excavated manuscripts.

Bushman, in her “Acknowledgments,” claims that she was drawn to her particular materials in the Schlesinger Library on the History of Woman in America (located at Radcliffe College) because that repository was “the pleasantest of archives in which to work and only ten minutes from my home.” Moreover, she says, Harriet Robinson’s character had value for her “in working out [her] own destiny.” Neither of these reasons, of course, is intended as serious apologia for the work. In her “Introduction,” Bushman addresses the question a bit more directly, pointing out that a narrative about an ordinary family “holds considerable significance in this day of growing interest in family history and plain people” and going on to affirm that the lives of the Robinsons are “useful in understanding the nonrich, nonfamous people of the past.”

Well, after a fashion, that does make a start in the direction of answering the question, “Why publish such a book?” In the past, in addition to being overwhelmingly from the male perspective, our accounts have been either of the rich or of the famous (who were often, though not always, rich as well).

Obviously, however, every excavated manuscript cannot and should not become a book. That is one of the common misconceptions about the value of such records. When a newspaper article was printed widely across the country mentioning that I was going to teach a class at BYU in “Women’s Journals Then and Now,” I received scores and scores of let-

ters from people who wanted to know if I would be interested in making a book from their Aunt Minnie's diaries or from Great-grandmother's letters.

The reality is that while such letters and diaries are very important and should be preserved in some repository such as the state historical society library or the archives of a state university, their value is that of one or several pieces in a very large, multi-pieced puzzle. These records should be available for scholars and writers to consult as primary source material of the first order. But only occasionally do such materials become books, and then usually not for the reasons the family members might expect—because the ancestor “lived an exciting life” or because “she wrote such beautiful poems and descriptions of things.”

We might generalize and say that the personal writings we are talking about become books for one of three reasons. First, because family members are interested enough to subsidize the printing of such a book, intended mainly for consumption by family members and a small additional circle. I think of a personal history currently working its way into print: *Man of Multiple Dreams*, the life of A. B. Christensen, a prominent Utah educator. This is a beautifully researched book written with great skill by his daughter, Lucile C. Tate. This is not the work of an objective historian or biographer, but a balanced, broad overview of a man's life as his descendants would be interested in knowing about it. At the other end of the spectrum, some personal writings are used as the bases for books because the figure involved is of major significance and because the biographer has grasped, through the study of that figure, some central truths about the period, truths which are in themselves of considerable importance. An example here is Martha Saxon's work, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (Avon: 1977), or the even more brilliant award-winning study of Alice James (sister of William and Henry James) by Jean Strouse.

The third kind of book is one such as Claudia Bushman has written. Harriet Hanson Robinson has no particular claim

to fame, but rather was a very minor figure on the fringes of the great abolitionist and suffragist movements of her day. Nonetheless, because of Bushman's thorough, careful work as a historian, future scholars will have insight into the aspirations, labors and strivings of a woman of that particular position and station at that particular time. Bushman's work is helpful in understanding how a woman moved from what we would today call the lower-middle-class (or even the lower class) to the solid middle—and why that move was important. What did it mean in terms of personal identity? In terms of work and a certain freedom from the endless round of household work? *A Good Poor Man's Wife* tells us. It also tells us, though perhaps not so fully as it might, what it meant to be a woman with ambition and energy and capacity in the nineteenth century, and what it meant to struggle with oneself to bridle those forces, to guide them rather exclusively into domestic paths. Had Harriet Hanson Robinson had the opportunities open to her husband, she would almost certainly have gone much further with them than he did. But those opportunities were not available—indeed, the Robinson women seemed to feel the need to frown on wives continuing with any sort of public career. Interestingly, though, once her husband was dead, Harriet resumed public activity with considerable relish.

It is important to understand that we have these insights because of the scholarly work Claudia Bushman did. Simply publishing selected excerpts from HHR's papers would not have resulted in the same achievement at all. History, quite as much as art, is in the eye of the beholder.

Bushman writes in an organized, interesting way, and her book is highly readable. There is an occasional lapse into a rather “inside-out” approach to things—as though the author were on the right track, only backwards, or upside down. For instance, she reads a poem of Harriet's called “My Choice,” in which HHR clearly claims she is “serene, content” to “roam in sunlit paths” with her husband. Discussing the verse, Bushman says “the poem indicates that Harriet's sunny optimism about married life sometimes failed