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Book Review: Hewitt, Nancy A. Women's Activism And Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872

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Book Review: Hewitt, Nancy A. *Women's Activism And Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872*

Abstract

Scholar Nancy A. Hewitt analyzes the lives of women in antebellum Rochester, New York, focusing how they adapted to a wide variety of changes during a turbulent period in American history.

Hewitt, Nancy A. *Women's Activism And Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

The study of the nineteenth-century women's role shifting beyond the confines of the private sphere of the family life continues to gain an increasing amount of attention among historians. This insightful book in American women's history throws considerable light on the expanding women's sphere in Rochester after 1822. Nancy Hewitt focusing on the decades before the Civil War explores the organization of women and their wide range of efforts in various activism within context of the social and economic order of Rochester.¹ She begins with a focus on how women's bonds were increasing in Rochesterville as the Yankee belt continued to experience a steady migration of New Englanders. In one of the fastest-growing cities in America at the time, Rochester was an urban economic center that boomed after the completion of the Erie canal. It became home to new Yankee traditions that were rapidly growing in the social and economic wakes that intertwined with the growing influences of the evangelical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening.

The book's central theme lies in the classification of three middle class to elite women's networks. The first group are the benevolent women, who were comprised mostly of Rochester's elite based on their social status and financial resources.² The second group are the ultraists that organized around abolition in the 1840s, which came from the agrarian Hicksite Quaker communities.³ The third group are the perfectionists that emerged from the revivals that aimed to reform the community by campaigning against the evils in the community, especially slavery and

¹ Page Putnam Miller, "Reviewed Works: Women's Activism and Social Change, Rochester, New York, 1822-1872," *American Presbyterians* 64, no 3 (Fall, 1986): 208-209.

² Suzanne Lebsock, "Reviewed Works: Women's Activism and Social Change, Rochester, New York, 1822-1872," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no 1 (Spring, 1985): 130-131.

³ Donald J. Ratcliffe, "Reviewed Works: Women's Activism and Social Change, Rochester, New York, 1822-1872," *Journal of the Early Republic* 8, no 3 (Autumn, 1988): 333-334.

liquor. The book offers a general outline and categorization of how women implemented various channels of beliefs, values, and resources that created multifarious kinds of reform in the character and development of Rochester. It provides how individual women and female organization relate to the rapidly growing urban environment in the evaluation of about six hundred primary and secondary sources, including diaries, autobiographies, newspapers, periodicals, and city documents. It does an excellent job of demonstrating how women used various networking strategies and influences to shift the conception of roles in the private sphere of the home and social location in a wide range of American experiences.

Hewitt covers a crucial time in a famous city for the expansion of the women's domain in light of the resistance between the sexes and rival men's and women's groups. The story she covers is more complicated than the general outline of the three groups that she classifies, revealing the book contains some significant flaws. The benevolent women of Rochester prevailed in the elite and middle classes which interacted with benevolent and voluntary activity across the nation. Rochester's perfectionist campaigned with temperance, abolition, and moral reforms adding to the complex web of women's activism. The story that Hewitt is sharing is more complicated than what is written in her book, and her categorization of three significant networks needs much more explanation and definition. Nonetheless, the expanding women's domain remains a difficult task to write about, and Hewitt does offer valuable research on the women's role in the social, economic, and family circles in Rochester. Overall, the book does successfully reveal that the women's sphere was not restricted to the private sphere of the family and that the rapidly changing urban environment in the wake of the Second Great Awakening offered prime conditions for women to demonstrate new roles in one of the fascinating cities in America during the period.

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