

Gerda Lerner. *Why History Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. xvii + 249 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-504644-1.



Reviewed by Margaret Ripley Wolfe

Published on H-Women (September, 1997)

Witnesses to the professional historical conventions of yesteryear might have concluded that historians were bearded creatures, smelling faintly of bourbon, clad in baggy tweeds, and transported on a cloud of tobacco smoke. Those learned males spoke mostly of such important topics as war, diplomacy, and politics. Thanks to the inspirational presence and leadership of Gerda Lerner as well as other historians, men and women, the circumstances that lent credence to such an image have been altered.

Describing and analyzing the lives of women historically is a "report from the trenches" in a field of research that is relatively new but rapidly maturing. When the recent wave of "organized feminism was born," according to American social historian John Demos, "it expressed an anguished cry from the depths of oppression. The plot-line of women's history ever since has been a stop-and-go effort to escape those depths--or, stated in less extreme terms, to push back the limits of constraints." [1] The late nineteenth-century American satirist Ambrose Bierce defined history as "an account mostly false, of events mostly unimpor-

tant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools." [2] If Bierce were living in the contemporary world of political correctness, he would undoubtedly have something to say about the "sisterhood."

Those who claim some expertise in women's history have erected their own shrines, fashioned their own icons, and developed their own ideology. Still, women historians need offer no apologies for the fact that feminist research and women's studies programs represent a significant phase of the recent women's movement; such an admission hardly negates the quantity and quality of their scholarly contributions. Females constitute a numerical majority and a political minority in the United States. Achieving equality for the women in American society is a political objective, and expanding democracy is in keeping with American ideology. Whatever gains that women have made must be cherished and protected and claimed as if they were "ancient and sacred privileges."

The writing of women's history may be as personal an act as the writing of fiction, for the

historian, knowingly or unknowingly, may be seeking to understand herself and her own world as well as other women and their collective past. Unlike the writer of fiction, however, the historian finds no refuge in fabrication. Just as history, memoir involves selectivity--what is revealed and what is concealed, what is made public and what is kept private. Gerda Lerner's *Why History Matters* neither purports to be a full-fledged memoir nor an actual autobiography; yet it possesses certain characteristics of both. Its author is one of the creators of the specialty of women's history and a founding member of the National Organization for Women. As a pioneer in developing graduate programs in women's history, a former president of the Organization of American Historians, and now Robinson-Edwards Professor of History, Emerita, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, her work as a feminist scholar has been informed by the remarkable reservoir of personal human experience from which she has drawn.

In her first volume of essays, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, Gerda Lerner traces her development as a feminist scholar from 1960 to 1979.[3] Her latest book, *Why History Matters*, deals with this on-going process from 1980 to the present. Taken together, these two volumes reveal a great deal about her personal life and her public career. Born in 1920, Gerda Lerner, an Austrian Jew, was in her eighteenth year when German troops occupied her country and the Nazis set about eliminating her people. Her native Vienna, which possessed a population of approximately 176,000 Jews in 1934, claimed only 4,746 ten years later. Instead of entering university training for which she had qualified, Lerner became a refugee.[4] She reports being quizzed about how "being Jewish" has influenced her historical interests. "The simplest way I can answer this question," she writes, "is, I am a historian because of my Jewish experience." Being "a Jew and a Jewish woman and double difference became imprinted on me--not pride, but embarrassment; not collectivity, but exclusion ... my dis-

comfort at being part of the religious Jewish community was based not so much on theological differences as on my unwillingness to accept the role this community assigned to women." [5]

After fleeing Austria, Lerner settled in the United States, married, raised two children, and worked in a variety of jobs outside the home. At age thirty-eight, she became a "reentry student" at the New School of Social Research in New York City, earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1962. She did graduate work in history at Columbia University, completing her Master of Arts and Doctorate of Philosophy in three years. When Lerner was under consideration for admission to the Ph.D. program, she was asked why she had taken up the study of history. Her response: "What I want to do is to make the study of women's history legitimate ... I want women's history to be part of every curriculum on every level, and I want people to be able to specialize and take Ph.D.s in the subject and not have to say they are doing something else. I want women's history respected and legitimized in the historical profession." [6]

By 1979, Lerner writes, "The two aspects of my own consciousness, that of the citizen and that of the scholar, had finally fused." She had become "a feminist scholar." *Why History Matters* deals with Lerner's "coming to consciousness as a Jewish woman" and "the many and complex reasons" that history matters to her.[7] Along with an introduction, this book has three parts: "History as Memory," "History: Theory and Practice," and "Re-Visioning History." Each part offers from three to five essays, prepared over a period of several years mostly for oral presentations and revised for publication in this volume. Readily apparent is the author's concern for the consideration of race, class, and gender and her acknowledged debt to such pioneer women historians as Mary Beard and Eleanor Flexner.[8] Felicity of style and feminine intuitiveness only serve to enhance the text, which reveals the musings of a brilliant mind and the tragedies and triumphs of this woman's life.

Why History Matters reminds its readers of the history that we study as well as the history that we make.

Why History Matters and its earlier companion piece, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, are likely to inspire a certain amount of nostalgia, sending readers down memory lane to reflect on our own lives and careers, our heroines and role models, the first women's caucuses or first professional conventions we attended, and the origins of our own feminism. We have now witnessed approximately three decades of sustained commitment to and development of feminist scholarship. Our stories as a community of scholars--as a generation of contributors to this new specialty--are important; they need to be told. In reunion, remembrance, and reflection, we should be inspired by Gerda Lerner's example and tell our stories lest our individual and collective experiences be only casually recorded or cavalierly discarded.

Notes:

[1]. John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4, 11.

[2]. Bierce offered such definitions in a column that he penned for a weekly newspaper during 1881. That same year, his writing was published as *The Cynic's Word Book* and later as *The Devil's Dictionary*. Bierce is perhaps as much a part of American humor as Mark Twain and Will Rogers although not as well known. In 1913, Ambrose Bierce, then seventy-one years old, left for Mexico and was never heard from again. Thus, one of America's greatest satirists vanished. Since his disappearance, he has been rediscovered many times although apparently not sighted. Film-maker and actress Jane Fonda projected him onto the silver screen as "Old Gringo."

[3]. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[4]. *Ibid.*, xv.

[5]. Lerner, *Why History Matters*, 5, 8-12 (quoted material from 5, 8).

[6]. Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, xix-xx.

[7]. Lerner, *Why History Matters*, xii, xvii.

[8]. Mary R. Beard, *Women as Force in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1946); and Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Suffrage Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959). See also Linda K. Kerber, "The Challenge of 'Opinionative Assurance,'" *National Forum: The Phi Kappa Phi Journal* 77 (Summer 1997): pp. 9-13. Citing "opinionative assurance" as a phrase used by Mary Beard in her 1946 book, Kerber writes, "I have not seen the phrase ... before or since, but when I read it I knew exactly what Beard was talking about: the certainty with which we clothe our opinions when we feel that they are beyond question" (p. 9). "We now stand firmly on a base of a quarter-century of exciting research and writing. We at last have the capacity to disrupt old ways of telling historical stories. It is time for a little 'opinionative assurance' of our own" (p. 13).

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Margaret Ripley Wolfe. Review of Lerner, Gerda. *Why History Matters*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1325>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.