



Judith N. McArthur. *Creating the New Woman: The Rise of Southern Women's Progressive Culture in Texas, 1893-1918.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. x + 199 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06679-5; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02376-7.

Reviewed by Nancy Beck Young (Department of History, McKendree College)

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A Nuanced Look at the Politicization of Texas Women

What is women's history? What is political history? What is social history? Books like Judith McArthur's *Creating the New Woman: The Rise of Southern Women's Progressive Culture in Texas, 1893-1918* cause headaches for historians who try to find a clear distinction among the above-mentioned categories. McArthur's book implicitly suggests that the boundaries between the sub-fields, if they exist at all, are fluid. As a result, *Creating the New Woman* complements and enhances the growing body of literature examining the public personas of early twentieth-century women. Pioneers like A. Elizabeth Taylor and Anne Firor Scott paved the way for a new generation of women's historians who have written widely on public women. Some of the most important recent books examine Southern and Texas women, and include works by Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, Glenda Gilmore, Elizabeth Hayes Turner, and Elizabeth York Enstam.[1]

The result of this scholarship is a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of politics, society, and women. Political history is not just the story of male officeholders and the elections that brought them to power; social history is not just an analysis of the everyday life of nameless, faceless individuals; and women's history is not just the story of how events shaped women. McArthur's Texas women came to the public sphere by a myriad of paths that had one thing in common: concern for the impact of particular social issues or problems on the daily lives of women, children, and their families.

In less than 150 pages, McArthur combines an introduction, six tightly woven chapters, and a conclusion to convey the important story of Southern women's evolving appreciation of their need for a public voice. A valuable addition to the literature, *Creating the New Woman* is based on extensive manuscript research, a careful reading of the contemporary public-opinion literature, and the historiographical contributions of other scholars. A highly readable account, the book could usefully be assigned in courses on women, Texas, the South, or the Progressive Era. The monograph would be a worthy addition to college libraries that collect women's history, Southern history, and American history in general.

McArthur's argument, suggested by her title, is that the confluence of social and political forces geared toward reform in the Progressive Era served to create a new woman. Yet her women were not passive vessels waiting for society to act on them; instead, they were active agents in the reconstruction of first their worlds and then themselves. This process of politicization was a slow one, though, for women in Texas and throughout the South. According to McArthur, the notion of separate spheres for men and women remained in place much longer in the South than in the North. Bound by tradition and by the culture of racism, women (especially African Americans and Mexican Americans) found it difficult to break out of their traditional roles as wives and mothers. McArthur avoids the pitfall of talking about women in the generic sense but only using evidence about white women. Her study compares and contrasts the diver-

gent paths to the public arena taken by white, African-American, and Mexican-American women.

Not until the club movement gained strength in the region did women of any race even have a model for public activity. Indeed, as McArthur indicates, the club movement was the integral first step toward the creation of the new woman. Women joined clubs in which study of contemporary issues gave them a heightened awareness of social problems. While not willing to address those problems in what they defined as a formal, political manner, women were nevertheless more than willing to visit “legislative halls as concerned mothers rather than ‘lobbyists.’ ... Clubwomen called petitioning and persuading ‘educating public opinion’ and insisted that their nonpartisanship was proof of being ‘above politics’” (p. 29).

In a subsequent chapter, McArthur contends that the technological advances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only changed the way women kept house, but also made it possible for women to see themselves as housekeepers for society at large. As such, clubwomen fought the state legislature for an industrial college for women that included a curriculum in the new science of home economics. They also sought the addition of home economics to the offerings of the University of Texas. In both campaigns they were successful. These victories gave organized women new allies for the future and made women realize the importance of controlling such public spaces as colleges and universities. That lesson gained even more impact when women had to fight for the passage of food inspection legislation and for equal distribution to women and men of federal money for agricultural extension work. Victory in the first effort was no comfort for defeat in the second. McArthur concludes that the “seeds of feminist consciousness sprouted from this activity” of lobbying for reform legislation (p. 52).

Concern for their children brought clubwomen to the struggle for education reform in the South. In this important chapter, McArthur delineates the differences between male and female support for increased spending. White men saw improved schools as the route to an improved regional economy. Thus, they sought more industrial coursework in the higher grades. White women, on the other hand, came to education out of concern for the children. As such, they focused on problems within the primary grades. Furthermore, women displayed the determination not only to ensure passage of the reforms but also to work in a voluntary way to ensure their en-

forcement on the local level. As the issue of education reform indicates, women had a broader definition of politics than men did, even if they did not entirely recognize their activities as political.

One of the strongest features of this very good book is the way in which McArthur leads the reader through the various episodes that heightened women’s political consciousness. She asserts that the campaign for suffrage could not take place until women had sufficient reason to believe it necessary. McArthur does not provide an overall history of the suffrage fight in Texas but instead evaluates suffrage from the perspective of the evolution of women’s public culture. She finds that there were two stages of suffrage activism in Texas and the South. The first, which was elite-driven, occurred in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and called for the vote from the perspective of equality and justice. Too radical for most women, this movement failed to gain many adherents. It was the effort during the 1910s that culminated in the winning of political equality for women. In this second stage, women made their case not with the feminist plea for gender justice but with maternalism, or, the projection of women’s domestic responsibilities and concerns to society at large.

McArthur also deals quite deftly with the use of race as an argument for and against woman suffrage. She contends that on this point white Texas women differed from their Southern sisters in that they did not make the statistical argument that votes for white women would effectively disenfranchise black men. McArthur realizes that this one point does not make her subjects shining examples of integrationist thinking. Instead, her findings are much more nuanced. She insists that the Texas suffragists realized that their “chances of success depended on race not becoming an issue. Bigotry and fear being nearly impervious to logic and statistics, race was the antisuffragists’ best weapon, and they used it ruthlessly to inflame anxieties that went much deeper than voting” (p. 115).

McArthur’s conclusion both summarizes her book and suggests areas for further work on gender and Southern politics. She contends that the female public culture described in the first two-thirds of the book was the necessary prerequisite for suffrage because it helped women learn of the discrimination they faced. Thus, women’s public culture, as it emerged, was much more progressive than the male public culture that it often reacted against. This thought-provoking book should both enhance scholarly understanding of the process by which

Southern women gained a public voice and encourage further work that evaluates the reasons for women's liberalism relative to men's conservatism in the region.

Note:

[1]. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*

(Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996); Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion and Reform in Galveston, 1880-1920* (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997); Elizabeth York Enstam, *Women and the Creation of Urban Life: Dallas, Texas, 1843-1920* (College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 1998).

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