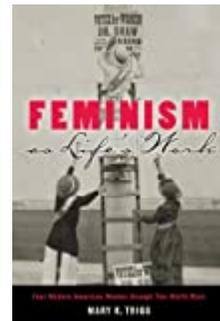




Mary K. Trigg. *Feminism as Life's Work: Four Modern American Women through Two World Wars.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014. xii + 266 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-6523-1; \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-6522-4.



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Cannibals and Bolsheviks

This compelling and depressing book interweaves the biographies of four less-celebrated women whose activism helped drive American feminism between 1910 and 1977. Mary K. Trigg aims to dispel a popular misconception that ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the onset of the Depression, and the distraction of World War II blew the wind out of feminism's sails until the Second Wave of the 1950s and 60s. *Feminism as Life's Work* resuscitates that supposedly moribund period in a group portrait with enough urgency, vitality, and internecine skirmishes to show that the feminist struggle remained strong during the doldrums, if below the radar of front-page headlines (p. 5).

To get the depressing part out of the way first: it is not Trigg's fault that women in 2015 struggle with so many of the same issues that our predecessors did fifty, sixty ... ninety years ago. Still, it is painful to be reminded on page after page that despite another century of advocacy, the United States has not managed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment; that juggling career, relationships, and children remains a vexing challenge to individuals

rather than a comprehensive national program to support healthy women and families; that American women still earn \$.75 to a man's \$1.00; that women comprise 14 percent of American corporate executives, 12 percent of governors, and 19 percent of members of Congress; and that all those figures are worse for women of color. I hate to think how Trigg's subjects would feel if they knew how little has changed since they devoted their lives to women's rights.

Prior to this book, Trigg edited *Leading the Way* (2010), which consisted of first-person accounts of feminist activism by a wide range of contemporary young American women. The anthology was intended to disprove another myth: that Millennial women had turned their backs on the feminist project. In the current monograph, Trigg reaches back a full century to chronicle the lives and commitments of an earlier generation of toilers in the feminist field. Just as *Leading the Way* shone a light on unsung heroines of today's movement, *Feminism as Life's Work* resurrects the post-suffrage period through the triumphs and tribulations of Mary Ritter Beard (1876-

1958), Inez Hayes Irwin (1873-1970), Doris Stevens (1888-1963), and Lorinne Pruette (1896-1977). Trigg distributes chunks of their individual stories in chapters that focus on girlhood, woman suffrage, work, motherhood, marriage, and international dimensions of the women's movement. (While this topical method of organization underscores common themes and struggles, I found it hard to get attached to or follow the life stories of the four main characters.)

Beard, often credited as the founder of women's history, was a freelance historian whose major work, *Woman as Force in History* (1946), argued that academics minimized the role of women in world events, and attempted to fill in the gaps. She married and collaborated on seven books with historian Charles Beard, whose reputation often eclipsed hers. Mary Beard explained: "reviewers often imply that the whole product is C. A. B.'s, in spite of the fact that he had never written on cultural themes before" (p. 102). To his credit, Trigg reports, Charles protested when "editors, critics, and readers overlooked Mary in their collaborative ventures." Beard's activism centered on the "socioeconomic inequalities" of capitalism and fought to improve conditions for working women through social and legal reform (p. 5).

Irwin lived to be ninety-seven and published forty-two books of history, fiction, and children's literature, as well as journalism and essays, all of which illuminated women's lives and championed women's equality. She enjoyed a new-style marriage to William Henry Irwin, her "angel husband," who "provided her an emotionally sustaining marriage with autonomy to pursue her own creative work" (p. 109). Irwin served as the first fiction editor of *The Masses*, the first female president of the Author's League of America, a leader in the National Women's Party (NWP), and a fierce proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Stevens was a charismatic speaker and organizer who led or participated in "virtually all the radical tactics initiated by the [National Women's Party] in the final years of the suffragist movement" (p. 6). Later, she became a leader in international feminism, although her elitist vision excluded working-class women and women of color because she thought their rough manners would alienate influential men. Stevens conducted a complex, often fraught relationship with mentor Alice Paul, the wealthy founder and benefactor of the NWP.

Pruette, the youngest of the quartet, earned a PhD in psychology at Columbia University in 1924 and became

a major theorist and speaker. Her unhappy marital experiences confirmed her theoretical suspicion that men have an inherent sense of inferiority that breeds a need to control women. Therefore, she believed, it was naïve to expect dramatic improvement in the power dynamics between husbands and wives. She remained a practicing psychotherapist into her sixties. Toward the end of her life, Pruette was "rediscovered" in the feminist revival. She told an oral historian that she was "delighted to find that I am now a classic" of feminist theory (p. 187).

An important thread running through the book is the tension between two strains of early to mid-twentieth-century feminism. Social protection feminists, including Beard and Pruette, viewed female citizenship as "rooted in motherhood and family life" and advocated for policies that recognized women's particular needs and vulnerabilities (p. 97). The Women's Joint Congressional Committee, for example, pursued a "maternalist program" of protective legislation to regulate wages, hours, working conditions, and social welfare benefits for female breadwinners working the "second shift" at home (pp. 96, 129). Equal rights advocates like Irwin and Stevens, however, wanted to erase legal distinctions between men and women to end male privilege in public and private domains. This group, allied with the National Women's Party, proposed and fought for the Equal Rights Amendment that was finally approved by the US Congress in 1972 but never ratified by the requisite thirty-eight states. Trigg suggests that had this movement not insisted on "full equality with men" rather than "equality in difference," it is possible that the ERA might now be law (p. 190).

"Being a modern feminist was not easy," Trigg announces on the first page (p. 1). Her detailed and well-documented narrative supports the assertion. She mines private papers, letters, and diaries to supplement published works by and about her four main characters to provide detailed accounts of their often difficult personal and public lives. The women featured in her book "suffered in the process" of securing the vote, improving working and living conditions, moving toward companionate marriage, and disrupting other forms of gender oppression (pp. 175). For their efforts, they withstood personal disappointments and sacrifices, internal divisions, criticism, ridicule, and police harassment. Conservative isolationist groups published the "notorious" "Spider Web Chart" showing connecting threads among U.S. women's groups, Russian communist groups, and international pacifist organizations (p. 99). Doris Stevens included a light-hearted example in *Jailed for Freedom*, her

account of serving time for picketing the White House to rouse President Wilson's support for the Nineteenth Amendment. One of the arresting officers who herded suffragists into paddy wagons denounced them as "anabals and Bolsheviks" (p. 65).

Still, there are some blind spots in the discussion. Trigg dutifully mentions the needs and activism of working-class and minority—especially African American—women and the disagreements among mainstream activists about who belonged under the feminist umbrella. But her selection of four well-educated white women of means as the pegs on which to hang her history of midcentury feminism belies the inclusive impulse and re-inscribes the sad fact that these have often been separate, parallel struggles. The National Colored Women's Party delegations brought up the rear at protest marches. At least one black women's rights leader should have been included as more than a supporting character. Similarly, Trigg's presentation of intimate relationships is completely hetero-normative. Same-sex attractions and lesbians are barely mentioned until the

final chapter. In this way, the narrative foreshadows the Third Wave backlash against the white, middle-class feminist agenda of the Second Wave.

Feminism as Life's Work reminds us—in minute detail—what it took to keep the midcentury struggle for women's rights alive through two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the postwar period. If we have forgotten some of the individual women who turned their lives into sites of experiment, risk, and resistance; who agreed and disagreed; won some and lost some; and resiliently bounced back from disappointments, dismissal, divorce, and depression to keep the movement alive, perhaps it is because of their success. Lorine Pruette understood as early as 1927 that younger women who had not known the "tedious world against which the old-line feminists rebelled" would be "frankly amazed at all the feminist pother and likely bored when the subject comes up.... Nothing is so dead as the won causes of yesterday" (p. 93). Here, Trigg brings the cause and its champions back to vivid life and reminds us of our debt to unsung feminist pioneers.

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