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Lewis L. Gould. *Lady Bird Johnson: Our Environmental First Lady.* Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999. ix + 162 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0336-7.

Reviewed by Katherine M. Osburn (Department of History, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville, Tennessee)

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"Like Lipstick on a Woman": Lady Bird Johnsons' Campaign to Beautify America

In 1960 Mary Lasker, Lady Bird Johnson's aide in her campaign to beautify America, told New York City officials that "Flowers in a city are like lipstick on a woman. You have to have some color." As an example of the gendered issues surrounding Lady Bird's environmentalism, the quote captures the focus of Lewis Gould's fine study of Claudia Alta Taylor Johnson. Was Lady Bird Johnson a passive First Lady whose campaign to beautify America was merely cosmetic, or was she a serious environmental activist and a strong First Lady? Gould argues quite cogently for the latter interpretation, suggesting that the sexism of Lady Bird's critics and subsequent historians has hindered efforts to evaluate the campaign as a significant contribution to environmental activism. Gould examines Lady Bird's environmentalism from a gendered perspective, summarizing her accomplishments and analyzing her contributions as First Lady. Locating his analysis in the larger context of environmental history and the history of First Ladies, Gould argues that Lady Bird's activism made her both an important environmentalist and a notable force in defining the role of the modern first lady.

Claudia Alta Taylor's love of scenic beauty grew out of her childhood spent in the small town of Karnack, Texas near the Louisiana border. Born on 22 December 1912, she was nicknamed Lady Bird after an African American cook characterized her as "purty as a lady bird,' " a reference to the ladybird beetles of east Texas (p. 1). Gould briefly outlines Lady Bird's life from her childhood to her marriage to Lyndon Baines Johnson, who became Vice President in 1960. Throughout her years as a political wife, Gould writes, Lady Bird "maintained her own identity against...'the fragmentation of self'" common to public figures (p. 21).

As the vice president's wife, she often filled in for Jackie Kennedy in ceremonial duties that Mrs. Kennedy found distasteful, and, in so doing, was widely praised as a woman of grace and altruism. Yet when she became First Lady on 22 November 1963, she told a close friend "I feel as if I am suddenly on stage for a part I never rehearsed" (p. 22). Despite her self-doubts, she quickly established herself as a woman skilled in managing both the press and her volatile husband. Gould calls her LBJ's most trusted advisor, a role Hubert Humphrey once summarized by noting that, "in her own quiet way, she made him come to heel" (p. 29). In this charge, Lady Bird followed the conventions of other twentieth century First Ladies whose primary contribution was to their husband's agendas –Helen Herron Taft, Edith Bolling Wilson, and Bess Wallace Truman. Lady Bird, however, was also in the mode of Eleanor Roosevelt, whose accomplishments Gould summarizes as "ombudswoman to the nation, an advocate for the disadvantaged, and an agent of the president" (p. 30). Gould argues that, as she stepped into Eleanor's role, Lady Bird significantly expanded and redefined the position of First Lady.

In Lady Bird's initial steps as an activist First Lady she stumped for her husband's War on Poverty, but she soon found her own passion. As she sought to construct her own public identity, Lady Bird articulated "a mild, cautious feminism" founded in her self conceptualization as "preeminently a woman, wife, a mother, a think-

ing citizen" (p. 32). Her choice of scenic beautification as her project might also be considered a rather traditional cause. Thus, on one level, her activism did not directly challenge gender roles. Nonetheless, from this traditional platform, Lady Bird significantly expanded her unelected office. As the first activist First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt, she created her own bureaucracy to handle speeches and correspondence and to help her interact with television. More importantly, her beautification campaign involved her in public policy making to an unprecedented degree. "Although other First Ladies have backed legislative initiatives," Gould concludes, "Mrs. Johnson was the first one to have a specific law identified with her name in the Highway Beautification Act of 1965" (p. 129).

The Highway Beautification Act was one of several initiatives that drew Lady Bird into the machinations of power politics. She also worked to beautify "the two Washingtons," meaning both the public monuments and the blighted ghettos of the nation's capital. While historical analysis of policy making is potentially quite dull, Gould's examination of these campaigns is engaging. He spares us excessive details of the political horse-trading and his analysis of gender both in the First Lady's campaigns and in historians' evaluation of her accomplishments is perceptive. Lady Bird's program to improve the appearance of America may have been considered "fluffy" by some, but her political battles reflected both astute organizing skills and political savvy. Her Task Force for Natural Beauty, organizing the two day White House Conference on Natural Beauty, pulled together architects, philanthropists, environmental activists, businessmen, and government officials to design and implement "concrete, specific proposals for action" on combating urban blight (p.62). The diverse factions of this coalition clashed over how best to approach their work, but the Conference launched her campaign to enhance the aesthetics of the nation's capital most effectively.

Gould cites Lady Bird's city beautification campaign as a continuation of the City Beautiful movement of the Progressive Era, though he concludes that Lady Bird herself seemed unaware of her foremother's efforts. He notes that the criticisms of the earlier movement were again applied to the later one – that it was "cosmetic" and failed to address real urban problems. Gould challenges this assessment on several levels. He contends that Lady Bird "never believed that simple cleanups would be enough" and that she "operated from environmental premises as sound as those of her critics" (p. 55). In part, Gould argues, her use of the term beautification encouraged her critics not to take her seriously. Recognizing the constrictions placed on women in the early 1960s, Lady Bird was herself ambivalent about her undertaking. At times she denigrated her own work as that of "garden club ladies" and on other occasions she told reporters that she wanted to move "from the garden club to the hardware stage of the problem" (p. 55). Lady Bird's cosmetic contributions include helping to create the Hirshhorn art museum on the Washington mall, laying the groundwork for later revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue, and extensive landscaping all over the District.

Her efforts to move beyond the cosmetic were, in Gould's analysis, equally commendable. Working with the African-American executive director of the National Capital Housing Authority, Walter Washington, she organized Operation Pride, which promoted litter clean-up, home painting and repairs, and landscaping in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Working through Neighborhood Youth Corps and private agencies, Washington and others developed Project Pride to provide employment for inner city youth helping with the clean-up. This grassroots approach directly involved the residents in the project rather than dictating to them "from above what should be done" (82). As testament to the wisdom of this strategy, Gould notes that the riots that followed Martin Luther King's assassination spared many areas of the city that had been recently landscaped. In the aftermath of these riots, Walter Washington addressed the First Lady's critics by noting that, "You cannot tell me that…when hundreds of people [in the projects] came out, painted, fixed up their neighborhoods and said 'we would like to be part of this' [that it was] cosmetic" (p.87). Gould concedes that neighborhood improvement projects could not change "the intrinsic ills of the city and its black ghetto" (p. 88). Nonetheless, Project Pride had a profound positive impact on the quality of many people's lives.

Her other environmental campaign, to beautify the nation's highways, was somewhat less successful. To pass legislation restricting billboards on the nation's highways she and LBJ took on the powerful outdoor advertising industry, which had the support of organized labor. Her efforts to pass this legislation involved her in direct lobbying more than any previous First Lady. Lady Bird joined in strategy sessions to plan the lobbying, and participated directly in those efforts, meeting with House members critical to passage of the bill. Her actions led some to reproach her for overstepping her bounds. During the debates in Congress, some House members openly criticized the First Lady, and a billboard in Montana proclaimed "Impeach Lady Bird." Ironically,

the bill that finally made it through the gauntlet of attacks and special interests, the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, drew immediate criticism from Lady Bird's allies, who condemned it as a weak bill that gave away too many concessions to the outdoor advertising industry. Gould agrees that the bill was imperfect and that Lady Bird failed effectively to coordinate the grassroots groups that supported her cause. He excuses her failure, however, by noting that she really did not have the staff and the expertise she needed for a truly effective campaign. Moreover, largely due to gender stereotyping, her allies did not have an effectual coalition either. Proponents of billboard control were mostly women, and their concerns were frequently disparaged by male politicians at all levels. Gould describes their reactions to Lady Bird and her aides as "an elaborate display of feigned courtesy that masked a high degree of male condescension" (p. 103). The bill was, Gould concludes, the best that could pass given the political realities of the battle.

Gould's description of Lady Bird's efforts to promote her environmental agenda reveals a woman with good political instincts who knew how to win cooperation from key constituents and who consciously chose not to challenge gender roles in so doing. While Lady Bird effectively used her position as First Lady to generate public support for her programs, she also recognized the limitations she faced as a women. Following the criticisms that hounded her efforts on the Highway Beautification Act, she decided that she should be "more careful and less visible but no less active" in her lobbying (p. 102). Moreover, Lady Bird was not above pandering to sexist stereotypes to influence her benefactors. While courting Joseph Hirshborn to support the museum eventually named after him, she hid her knowledge of art in order to let him impress her with his own. Her strategy worked, and Hishborn endowed the museum citing her as a "decisive factor." During the struggle over the Highway Beautification Act, her chief aide, Liz Carpenter, put on her "best Joy perfume and her tightest girdle" and visited the undecided members of the Texas delegation (p. 98). Gould notes these instances without judgment, preferring to portray these women as products of the gender roles of their era, and thus illustrating women's complex and ambivalent relationship with power.

It is this relationship and historian's dismissive evaluation of Lady Bird's environmental efforts that provide some of the most stimulating material this book, and it is a shame that Gould could not develop these ideas more fully in this brief monograph. The book is the first in a series on modern First Ladies that seeks to examine "what the First Ladies did during their time in Washington, what their historical impact was, and how they contributed to the evolution of an institution that occupies a unique place in the government of the United States" (p. vii). From the vantage point of an "institutional" history of First Ladies, this well-written and researched book succeeds wonderfully. Yet the context of 1960s feminism in which Lady Bird lived remains elusive. While it is true that, as Gould maintains, the majority of women played a "constricted" role in American public life in the 1960s, it is also true that the early 1960s saw significant transformations in women's political activities. "Second Stage" feminism pushed legislation favorable to women and flooded the newly created EEOC with grievances, and women in the civil rights movement directly and courageously confronted relations of power over questions of race. From this perspective, Lady Bird's concern over scenic beauty can appear classist, self-indulgent, and trivial.

While Gould successfully defends the importance of Lady Bird's accomplishments in light of the political limitations of First Ladies, thinking about his analysis in the larger context of 1960s women's history raises some questions. Readers may wonder how Lady Bird's choice of a traditionally "feminine" campaign conducted with traditionally "masculine" tactics, such as direct lobbying, was shaped by the interaction of the decade's changing gender roles, evolving expectations that Americans hold regarding First Ladies, and her own personality and life story. Gould makes excellent use of a variety of sources including White House files, papers of her aides, county records from Texas, oral histories, and the Lyndon Johnson Papers, but it may be that these questions cannot be answered until Lady Bird's personal papers are opened to researchers.

The question of historical evaluation, moreover, is one of the more interesting topics Gould raises. One of his most striking points is a "throw away" line buried in the middle of the book. He writes: "In assessing the contributions of First Ladies to American life, judgments often adopt a male-centered criteria to evaluate what these women have accomplished. When Lady Bird Johnson beautified the monumental areas of Washington and addressed the difficult problems of inner city life at the same time, she was engaging in a campaign that, had a man pursued it, would have been regarded as a significant contribution to urban life in a major city" (pp. 88-89). This line resonates with historians of women's lives who have questioned evaluations of women's historical experiences based primarily on their "public" contributions.

One wonders, however, if the dismissive attitude towards beautification is entirely about "male" values. What exactly does Gould mean by "male-centered criteria?" Would the beautification campaign really have been taken more seriously by historians had a male directed it? Gould notes that Lady Bird and her supporters thought so, claiming that when LBJ addressed the issue, " 'it became a much more masculine approach, and it became much more talking of natural parks and society. It became much more acceptable' " (p. 54). Perhaps Gould has, in this instance at least, pinpointed lingering sexism in our profession.

Perhaps, on the other hand, other factors in the historical profession are at work. Lady Bird's story is primarily of interest to historians of the environment and women. Environmental historians such as Carolyn Merchant and Glenda Riley, among others, have documented women's environmental contributions (some of which might be interpreted as "fluffy"), but the role of women in environmentalism is a relatively small area of focus for the field. It could be, then, the neglect of Lady Bird's activism may be more a result of the state of environmental history, which is a relatively new and still evolving field, than of some elusive "male centered" criteria for historical assessment.

For historians of women's history, it may also be that other women activists in the period have simply overshadowed Lady Bird with their more radical and visible campaigns. Likewise, historians attracted to both environmental and women's history may hold more radical perspectives that see the struggles of racial and ethnic minorities and the working class against profound political, economic and social injustices as more worthy topics of study. Whatever the reason for the oversight of Lady Bird's environmental activism, Gould's absorbing study redresses this neglect, and makes an important contribution, both to environmental history and to women's history.

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