

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anne Beiser Allen. *An Independent Woman: The Life of Lou Henry Hoover.* Contributions in American History. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000. viii + 211 pp. \$68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-31466-7.

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Published on H-Women (February, 2002)

What Makes for a Good Biography?

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Biography has been the centerpiece of historical inquiry for generations. Not until the 1960s and 1970s were significant questions raised about the merits of studying elite, white men, the then-most common subjects of the biographical genre. With the advent of the “new social history,” questions about life “from the bottom up,” and the historical “discovery” of previously ignored peoples—including women, minorities, and the poor—historians increasingly rejected biography as a legitimate form of scholarship. However, as these tectonic shifts have been assimilated into the mainstream, another newer development has transpired among both academically trained historians and the writers of history for popular audiences: the resurgence of biography as a legitimate field of inquiry. Witness the immense popularity of David McCullough’s recent work on John Adams as just one example of the public’s fascination with biography.

Within the scholarly community, even more significant developments have occurred. Some of the most exciting new books have been published within the subgenre of feminist biography, which “address[es] topics most biographers seldom touch on, such as how women’s private and public lives intersect.”[1] Works by Blanche Wiesen Cook, Sara Alpern, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Susan Ware, and Elisabeth Israels Perry exemplify the rewards of this approach.[2] However, feminist scholars are not the only academics to employ the biographical method for interpreting the past. Within the field of political his-

tory, some of the most noteworthy books of late have used the tools of biography to convey very complex analyses of the past.[3] Historical biography is thus an art that is coming back into style. Its success results from the ability of practitioners not only to convey the details of their subjects’ lives, but also to situate those lives within the larger context of their times. The best examples of the genre have several characteristics in common: thorough manuscript research, elegant writing, and compelling interpretations.

Unfortunately, Anne Beiser Allen’s new book, *An Independent Woman: The Life of Lou Henry Hoover*, fails on all counts. The 176 pages of text have been divided into a prologue, sixteen chapters, and an epilogue. The details of Hoover’s life are presented in a chronological fashion, and are too often void of placement into any larger context. Space within the narrative is skewed toward treatment of Hoover’s life prior to 1929, with only thirty-eight pages devoted to her tenure as first lady. While the 1929-1933 period saw Hoover scale back the intensity of her public activity, it nonetheless proved to be a turning point within her public and private life. The White House years were a culmination of her voluntary activism; she used her contacts to facilitate private relief efforts. Her own political ideology moved rightward as a result of the numerous public attacks on her husband. Furthermore, the part of the text describing Hoover from her birth through 1928 lacks sufficient depth for the reader to understand the later impact of the depression on her life.

The research for *An Independent Woman* is woefully thin. For First Ladies previous to Lou Henry Hoover, interested biographers and scholars have faced a legitimate archival challenge in that insufficient and incomplete materials have been preserved for research with fragmentary or no original records to document the private lives of presidential spouses and only sparse records for their public activities. For scholars of Hoover, though, the story is much different. Her papers, which are housed at the Herbert Hoover Library in West Branch, Iowa, fill 182 linear feet of shelf space and are rich with detail about her private and public life. Furthermore, the collection has been carefully catalogued, making the research process all the more manageable. In addition to Hoover's own papers, substantive materials about her life can be located in numerous other manuscript collections at the Hoover Library as well as other archival repositories. Allen, though, seems to have only skimmed the surface with regard to researching Hoover's life. Her notes and bibliography are inadequate; the notes do not provide sufficient information about the location of the individual documents being cited and the primary source section of the bibliography is equally confusing, leaving readers to guess whether the letters referenced are independent manuscript collections or subsets of the Hoover papers.

An Independent Woman also suffers from writing and organizational flaws. There is no logical structure to the ordering of ideas and paragraphs within the chapters. For example, on page 157 there are seven and a half paragraphs covering seven and a half different subjects. This problem is all too common throughout the book, and while the writing within any given paragraph is clear, the overall choppy nature of the organization detracts from the reader's ability to follow the story. The reader is thus forced to make her way through a myriad of details with little or no sense from the author as to why any of them are important or how they relate to one another.

Most problematic, though, is the lack of a strong thesis. Allen suggests in her prologue that Hoover "was more than just a lady. She was a truly independent woman" (p. 4), but this argument is not sufficiently developed in the subsequent chapters for the reader to be able to assess its merits. These criticisms are all the more troubling because Hoover has been overlooked by historians for too many years. Her life reflects much that should

interest women's historians and political historians: she was one of the first women to receive a degree in geology; she had an egalitarian marriage; during World War I, she worked publicly for the relief of the Belgians, and she was an advocate on behalf of women war workers in Washington, D.C.; and in the 1920s, she participated extensively in women's voluntary organizations, serving as president of the Girl Scouts and organizing the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation. During her husband's presidency, she recorded several firsts for first ladies: she was the first first lady to speak on the radio, she was the first first lady to give regular interviews, she was the first first lady to be associated with a civil rights issue, and she was the first first lady to create a political program; and after her husband's presidency ended, she returned to her work with voluntary organizations. Her life story reveals much about elite women and conservative feminism, women's voluntary culture, and the intersections between such organizations and the public policy process. The academic community will be richly rewarded when Hoover receives a biography that does her important and nuanced life justice. Unfortunately, *An Independent Woman* is not that book.

Notes

[1]. Sara Alpern, et al, editors, *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 5.

[2]. Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933-1938* (New York: Viking, 1999); Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Viking, 1992); Sara Alpern, *Freda Kirchwey: A Woman of the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Susan Ware, *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism* (New York: Norton, 1993); Elisabeth Israels Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (New York: Routledge Press, 1992).

[3]. See for example Kendrick A. Clements, *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2000) and Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

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Citation: Nancy Beck Young. Review of Allen, Anne Beiser, *An Independent Woman: The Life of Lou Henry Hoover*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. February, 2002.

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