

# H-Net Reviews

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**Rosemary T. Van Arsdel.** *Florence Fenwick Miller: Victorian Feminist, Journalist and Educator.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001. xvi + 249 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-0331-3.

**Reviewed by** Donna Harrington-Lueker (Department of English, Salve Regina University)

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Rosemary Van Arsdel begins her life of Victorian feminist Florence Fenwick Miller with a quote from Carolyn Heilbrun's *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979): "What becomes evident in studying women ... who moved against the current of their times, is that some condition in their lives insulated them from society's expectations and gave them a source of energy, even a sense of destiny, which would not permit them to accept the conventional female role. Some condition of being an outsider gave them the courage to be themselves" (p. 3).

Van Arsdel's biography of Fenwick Miller ultimately misses that mark. Solid and meticulous, her book describes a public life that contested Victorian conventions of womanhood and a writing life that included essays on physiology for children's magazines, serialized domestic fiction, social commentary, and biography. Indeed, with details marshaled from an impressive array of archival sources, including Fenwick Miller's own unpublished autobiography of her early years, Van Arsdel establishes the fundamental lines of a life that spanned the women's suffrage movement in Britain and the United States, fleshing out the story of a woman who is often mentioned in the scholarship on the movement but rarely discussed at length. A professor emerita at the University of Puget Sound, Van Arsdel also has clearly done a service for future scholars with her extensive catalog of the articles Fenwick Miller wrote and the newspapers and magazines she worked for—a service one would expect from someone who has devoted a lifetime to the study of Victorian periodicals.

Although solid, Van Arsdel's narrative of Fenwick Miller's life—the first full-scale study of the Victorian feminist—lacks spark. Moreover, for the newspaper his-

torian, there is less close or sustained analysis than one might hope of the relationship between Fenwick Miller's journalism, market imperatives, and the emerging public discourse on women's rights. Those connections are left for someone else to make.

Born on November 5, 1854 ("the same day as the ferocious battle of Inkerman, waged in the Crimea" [p. 6]), Florence Fenwick Miller was the daughter of John Miller, a merchant marine captain whom Florence came to adore, and Eleanor Fenwick Miller, a widow who learned the Chandler's business after her first husband's death and with whom Florence had a difficult relationship, at best. "Occasionally, even now," Florence wrote at age seventy-eight, nearly fifty years after her mother's death, "I dream of her, and never otherwise than very angry with me about something or other" (p. 6).

After years of poverty and the demands of child-rearing (at one time the household included eight children, five of them Florence's cousins), Eleanor Miller removed her sixteen-year-old daughter from school and kept her at home to dust, sew, cook, and attend the occasional tea party or dance for diversion. The strong-minded Florence had other ideas, and in 1871, at the age of seventeen, she persuaded her parents to allow her to join Sophia Jex-Blake's campaign to open Britain's medical schools to women and to seek matriculation at the University of Edinburgh.

Fenwick Miller moved to Edinburgh to prepare for her entrance exams, a number of which she passed "with distinction." But Edinburgh's powerful professors refused to allow women into their classes, blocking Jex-Blake's progress and sending Fenwick Miller back

to London. There, undaunted, Fenwick Miller studied medicine at the Ladies' Medical College, completed a clinical practice in midwifery, and, at the age of twenty, set herself up in private practice, going out to visit patients from a bedroom in her mother's home. Two years later, at the age of twenty-two, a radical men's working club invited Fenwick Miller to stand for election to the London School Board—a body responsible for the education of nearly half a million children. Fenwick Miller agreed and was elected to that post, which she held for nine years.

At a time when unmarried women had few opportunities open to them—and married women fewer still—Fenwick Miller hurtled herself into public life, forging bonds with British intellectuals who debated the topic of women's rights, becoming a skilled lecturer on such topics in her own right, and developing a formal relationship with the British suffrage movement. Privately, she continued to navigate a difficult relationship with her mother and the financial realities of her marriage, in 1877, to Frederick Ford, the handsome—but mostly penniless—young honorary secretary of the London Dialectical Society, a debating society known for its radical approach to public issues.

But to what extent did radical constructions of women's rights, such as property rights for married women or voting rights, drive Fenwick Miller's own journalism, over time? And in what way did the popular press respond to the ideological controversies she found herself a part of or to the ideas she advanced? Van Arsdel's book does not answer those questions so much as it identifies the entry points for such analysis.

Early in her career as a school board member, for example, Fenwick Miller wrote in support of the American author Dr. Charles Knowlton and his book on population control, a work that had been on sale in England for forty years before authorities branded it obscene. That support, though, led to a public debacle, threatening Fenwick Miller's seat on the school board and calling into question her "womanly instincts" (p. 79). Here and elsewhere—in cases in which Fenwick Miller is the object of a press report or the producer of one—historians of journalism will want a more detailed analysis of the discourse around the issues and a closer look at the texts that contributed to it.

Clearly, too, Fenwick Miller had her eyes as much on the demands of the marketplace as on the ideology of women's rights. As Van Arsdel notes, Fenwick

Miller's need for an income coincided with a time of rising literacy rates and record numbers of periodicals, especially titles designed to reach women of a variety of social classes, including shop girls, ladies' maids, and mill workers. Sensitive to the needs of the marketplace, Fenwick Miller wrote serial fiction for *Lett's Illustrated Household Magazine* ("Solicitudes: A Domestic Science Story for Young Women"); a weekly column, "Filomena's Letter," that circulated to provincial newspapers; and weekly descriptions of the London social scene. Writing in the first-person for provincial papers, and in what seems more of the time-worn tradition of the woman's pages than the radical suffragist, Fenwick Miller devoted four columns to the wedding of the Lord Mayor of London's daughter at St. Paul's Cathedral, ending the piece with the following observations on the new phenomenon of electric lighting: "I dislike the effect of it very much; it makes the faces look hard and haggard by the intensity of its lights and shadows and it is ruinous to most colours.... The old gold lights up with it very well; white looks all right, although the effect of white against a pure complexion, which is the great charm of the colour, is entirely destroyed" (p. 116).

Finally, three chapters that focus on Fenwick Miller's life as a journalist provide a rich mine for future study. In one, Van Arsdel discusses Fenwick Miller's weekly column, "Ladies' Notes," in the *Illustrated London News*, whose circulation provided her with her largest audience and most sustained employment yet. She would spend thirty-two years as a columnist for that paper, producing more than 1,500 columns ("2,000 words due every Tuesday") and becoming, Van Arsdel says, a practitioner of the "new journalism." Another chapter touches briefly on her work as editor of two quarterlies, *Outward Bound* and *Homeward Bound*, advertising-driven literary magazines designed for readers in England's colonies. And a final one describes her tenure as editor of the *Woman's Signal*; her attempts to make that publication a suffrage periodical; and the friction between Fenwick Miller and Lady Henry Somerset, the periodical's one-time proprietor and persistent corresponding editor.

There's a curious fustiness to Fenwick Miller's writings as they are described here, a commitment to domesticity driven by economics, temperament, or culture, that can make Fenwick Miller seem a traditionalist on paper and radical in person. A close reading of her writing and its contexts could correct or confirm that, and Van Arsdel's biography is an important first step in that assessment.

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