

Christie as Queen of the Amazons in *WORK* by Louisa May Alcott

Women's Writes

Some new & old books explore women's lives, history & rights

Unknown works by well-known women

WORK

By Louisa May Alcott
Introduction by Sarah Elbert
Schocken Books, N.Y., paper,
\$5.95

Preface by Jane Graves
Virago Press, London
(4th Fl., 5 Wardour St., London
W1V 3HE)

Here are two "finds"—reprints of works by famous 19th century women writers, which have been not only unavailable, but virtual-

ly unknown to modern feminists.

Work is a novel—to a large extent autobiographical—by the author of *Little Women et al.*, which deals with the struggle of women to achieve dignity and independence through their own paid labor—to live, in other

words, as society expects men to live.

The choice between earning and marrying for a living is the critical choice for the heroine of *Work*, as well as for most of the subsidiary women characters. The difficulties put in the path of a woman who opts for earning provide the material of the plot. The resolution is positive.

Christie, who has worked and married and borne a child, finds herself at last where she "belongs"—speaking at an organizing meeting of the Working Women's Association.

The style is as sentimental and sentimentous as one would expect from the author of the March family chronicles, but the content of *Work* is profoundly realistic. It is a look at the real world in which the real Louisa May Alcott worked so hard at all sorts of jobs to support her family, that she was never able to take the time and pains to write as well as she knew she should.

There is an excellent introduction by Sarah Elbert, which puts the novel and its author in context for those to whom Alcott would have been addressing herself if she had written *Work* about the world of women today.

The same kind of an illuminating biographical essay prefaces Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour*, which has been rescued from oblivion by a new feminist press in London.

For those who know Olive Schreiner only as the author of *The Story of an African Farm* (or not at all), Jane Graves' essay is invaluable. It is followed by a longer and less interesting introduction by Schreiner herself, most of it a lament for the loss of the original manuscript, which was burned by invading troops in the Boer War.

Women and Labour is all that Schreiner could reconstruct of the lost *magnum opus*, which sounds as if it might have been a 19th century version of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Much of it is a reconstruction of history of the sort one finds in Beard's and Boulding's work (cf. pp. 21 & 22.) But Schreiner's emphasis is unique.

She regards work as a *right* of which women (particularly

middle and upper class women) have been gradually deprived. She attempts to prove that this deprivation is responsible for the degeneration of the women who suffer it, and that when too large a segment of the female half of any society is afflicted with what she calls "parasitism," the society crumbles. She therefore pleads for equal access to meaningful work for women "...not for herself, nor even for fellow-women alone, but for the benefit of humanity at large."

"We take all labour for our province!" means the work of governance as well as house- and midwifery. Women, in Schreiner's view, are peculiarly fitted to adjudicate questions involving war and peace because they "manufacture" the raw materials with which wars are fought and pay at least equal shares of the ultimate cost.

She has some sharp commentary on which sex is better fitted to make laws concerning "the temporary sale of the female body for sexual purposes" and other legislation that directly and painfully affects women. And she is remarkably clear on the source of heat in discussions of sex roles and changes in them.

"Social disco-ordination and subjective conflict and suffering ... make themselves more keenly felt in the region of sex than in any other... because when we enter that region we touch the spinal cord of human existence, where sensation is most acute, and pain and pleasure most keenly felt. It is not sex disco-ordination that is at the root of our social unrest; it is the universal disco-ordination which affects even the world of sex."

Graves' preface claims that, fragmentary as it is, *Women and Labour* became the "bible of the women's movement" when it was published in 1911. The style—stiffer than Alcott's, but no less sentimentous—separates it from that sort of audience among the contemporary feminists. But there are seminal ideas in Schreiner's work that are only now ready for cultivation—one of which is the possibility—indeed, the inevitability—of co-operation between men and women for the liberation of both. —J.S.

Lost novels about real American heroines

BREAD GIVERS

By Anzia Yezierska, \$3.95

DAUGHTER OF THE HILLS

By Myra Page, \$3.95
Persea Press, New York

Why would someone interested in women's fiction want to read a newly reissued novel, long out of print and written by an obscure author, when she could read Jane Austin and Virginia Woolf or pick up the latest Erica Jong or Joyce Carol Oates on her next trip to the A&P?

From the traditional academic point of view, great literature, by virtue of its excellence, magically survives its author, transcends its time and stays famous forever. The implication is that if a literary work dies, stops being published or never gets published in the first place, it must have deserved its fate. The logical conclusion of this reasoning is that

there are few good books by women in print today (as compared with the number of good books by men) because women haven't written many good books.

By ignoring the social and historical context within which writers create literature, this logic falsifies the truth. "Which writers have survived their time and which have not," feminist critic Louise Bernikow says, "depends upon who noticed them and chose to record the notice.... Such power, in England and America, has always belonged to white men.... In spite of token talk about Brontes and Dickinsons, most women writers have gotten lost."

In other words, many novels by women haven't died natural and deserved deaths. The literary establishment, the cultural gun thugs of the ruling class, murdered them.

To read once lost, newly found

novels is one way to recover our lost heritage, both literary and historical. By learning about where we've come from as women we can begin to teach ourselves where we should go as feminists.

For these reasons Persea Press' reprinting of Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and Myra Page's *Daughter of the Hills* is a wonderful event.

Bread Givers was originally published in 1925. Written by a woman who grew up in New York City's Jewish ghetto in the early part of this century, the novel concerns a woman's efforts to gain an education, become self-supporting and, most important, become an emotionally independent person apart from her family, whose religious tradition denies the humanity of women. *Bread Givers* chronicles Sara Smolinsky's painful internal war between her drive to become an autonomous hu-

man being and the love and resentment she feels toward her family.

Like the novels of Charlotte Bronte, *Bread Givers* records the passion, suffering and hunger of its author. Like Bronte's heroines, Sara Smolinsky seems to exist alone in a distant, hostile world. The rage of the writer, a powerful woman fettered by oppressive social conditions, drives the novel forward. Yezierska's humor—the tart, self-deprecating, defensive, angry humor of the oppressed—makes the reading rich.

Daughter of the Hills, first published in 1950, has warmth, calm and lyricism quite different from the emotional rawness and psychological realism of *Bread Givers*. Page's novel is the fictionalized biography of Dolly Hawkins Cooper, who spent her life in the Tennessee coal fields not long before the founding of the United Mine Workers. The story of a woman's growth toward political activism, *Daughter of the Hills* is also a love story reminiscent of Appalachian ballads, the romantic tale of a perfect marriage doomed to end through the death of the man. John Cooper's death, however, isn't romantic. He dies of injuries he receives in an un-

safe mine.

Daughter of the Hills suffers from a strange artistic conflict between its naturalistic treatment of the miners' oppressive working conditions and bittersweet community life and its idealistic treatment of a marriage. (It's revealing that Page identifies herself on the back of the book as a wife and mother first and a writer second.)

Further, only after John Cooper's death, which occurs near the end of the novel, does Dolly begin to assume a consciously political, active role in the miners' struggle for better working conditions rather than a role merely supportive of her husband. When Dolly does become active, she does so more from devotion to her husband's memory than from devotion to the struggle itself.

Despite its weaknesses, *Daughter of the Hills*, like *Bread Givers*, celebrates the strength and struggle of a proud, forceful woman. Feminists should joyfully welcome both novels back to the world of the living.

—Linda Greene
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Linda Greene is a socialist feminist who lives with another person and eight cats in Indiana.

Mary Beard's flawed legacy to feminists



Ann J. Lane, American historian, who is presently working on a biography of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

MARY RITTER BEARD: A Source Book
 Editor: Ann J. Lane
 Schocken Books, 1977, \$15 (hardcover) \$6.95 (paper)

Ann J. Lane has rescued from undeserved obscurity a scholar and activist—Mary Beard—who strove almost obsessively over a lifetime to destroy the common belief that women are an oppressed class.

Probably few realize that the present burgeoning movement for women's studies had in Beard a vigorous forerunner. In 1936 she started a World Center for Women's Archives, operative until WWII choked off funds. With two women friends she produced a biting "Study of the Encyclopedia Britannica in Relation to its Treatment of Women." She offered to the AAUW in 1934 an imaginative 56-page "Syllabus for a Women's Study Course" that proposed a "creative alternative to 'equal education,'" holding that "man's education...has become so rigid, so scholastic, that to parallel it...would count for very little in the stimulation of social intelligence."

Her biography was not easy to reconstruct. For some unknown reason Mary and her husband Charles, two of the New Historians of this century, destroyed most of their papers, letters and manuscripts. Ann Lane brings Mary Beard to life as woman and thinker, using interviews with intimate friends and relatives, the few pertinent documents they were able to furnish, and an analysis of her writings and speeches. The body of the book consists of excerpts from these, each carefully placed in its historical setting.

Besides bearing and caring for two children, constant action in causes like the suffrage movement and defense of the McNa-

maras and active membership in the National Women's Trade Union League, Mary collaborated with her husband from 1914 to 1942 to produce a five-volume history that shaped the thinking of generations—*The Rise of American Civilization*. By herself, she wrote six other books, *Women as Force in History* (1946) being perhaps the best known.

Convinced from her study and her experience that, though invisible in history, women had been a central force, she promoted an ideal of a conscious community of women, proud of their distinctively female culture and capable of creating new, more humanistic social relations, to the benefit of men as well as of women.

In books, articles and speeches, she sought to show that in primitive societies, in the Middle Ages, and in modern European culture until the 19th century, women have exercised real and impressive power, not only in domestic affairs but in domains where men have been more visible.

She taught, with a bow to Engels, that women's fate is tied up with economic class rather than with sex. As Ann Lane paraphrases her: "Ruling class women in pre-capitalist periods ruled, as did ruling class men. Lower class women suffered, but as slaves or peasants, not primarily as women." Not until the rise of capitalism, of machine rather than home industry, of the tyranny of private property with its attendant changes in law, were women driven from a position of dignity and power equal to that of men.

Although she brought to light important evidence for her thesis, it is hard to understand her failure to acknowledge such phenomena of sexual oppression as rape, female infanticide, and other kinds of sexual violence. Her "incomplete view of women in history," as Ann Lane puts it,

"profoundly weakens her work."

In explanation, Lane suggests that "sexuality was identified with the hated Freudianism that humiliated women." One surmises that Beard carried from her Calvinist upbringing a view of sex as "nasty." She wrote, for example: "Women who are willing to cringe before nasty husbands are weak creatures by choice." "In many ways," Lane says, "she remained tied to the...conception of woman as mother."

Stressing that "oppression of women resides essentially within the minds of women," Beard strove to help women reconstruct their self-image. To accept themselves as a subject class is to struggle from a position of weakness and to take a too simple-minded goal of "equality" in a man's world. Knowledge of their great historical contributions to wealth, art, beauty, science and technology can enable them to struggle from a position of strength, and their goal should be the introduction of female values into our whole culture.

Beard argued against the value of college education for women, on the ground that such education tends to co-opt women into a man's world, developed by and for men, and unbalanced to boot. To quote Lane's paraphrase: "Bright, ambitious women, caught up in the careerism and conformity that are fostered in the university, lose their innovative potential... They jeopardize the power that comes from independence..."

Beard also opposed the Equal Rights Amendment for which the Women's party of her day fought. Along with many feminists, she feared that in the name of "equal treatment," women's painfully won protective legislation would be lost, whereas it ought, instead, to be legally extended to all workers. Many who hold her views today nevertheless give the Amendment full support as the most viable chance of promoting the general welfare. Beard could not bring herself to do this.

Ann Lane attributes Beard's oneness, in part, to an almost conscious attempt, by leaning too far in one direction, to redress the long distortion in the other. She points sympathetically to Beard's intellectual isolation (after she left activism for intellectual analysis). She had little support from the women's movement of her day and no group of colleagues whose criticisms might have sharpened and balanced her thought.

In spite of obvious exaggerations and inconsistencies, Mary Beard's legacy has worth. By placing women at the center of society and history, she forced historians to take a second look at the world from her perspective. In Ann Lane's view: "She devoted years to an idea whose time had not yet come... Each effort was blocked, each struggle frustrated... Yet, if great change is ever to come, it will be because women like Mary Beard persisted and endured."

—Frances W. Herring
Frances W. Herring is retired from the faculty of U.C. Berkeley and is active in the peace and environmental movements.

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