

# A LIFE OF LEARNING

Gerda Lerner

Charles Homer Haskins  
Lecture for 2005



American Council of Learned Societies

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## The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture

Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first Chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the B.A. degree in 1887, and the Ph.D. in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, where he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America in 1926.

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of thirteen.

### Haskins Lecturers

2005	Gerda Lerner	1994	Robert K. Merton
2004	Peter Gay	1993	Annemarie Schimmel
2003	Peter Brown	1992	Donald W. Meinig
2002	Henry A. Millon	1991	Milton Babbitt
2001	Helen Vendler	1990	Paul Oskar Kristeller
2000	Geoffrey Hartman	1989	Judith N. Shklar
1999	Clifford Geertz	1988	John Hope Franklin
1998	Yi-Fu Tuan	1987	Carl E. Schorske
1997	Natalie Zemon Davis	1986	Milton V. Anastos
1996	Robert William Fogel	1985	Lawrence Stone
1995	Phyllis Pray Bober	1984	Mary Rosamond Haas
		1983	Maynard Mack

## Brief Biography

Gerda Lerner was born in Vienna, Austria in 1920. She emigrated to the United States in 1939. After working as a fiction writer and for many years as a participant in grassroots and community political movements, Lerner began her academic career in 1958. She received her B.A. from the New School for Social Research (now New School University) in 1963, and her M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1965 and 1966, respectively. Widely recognized and lauded as the pre-eminent scholar of women's history and one of the foremost champions of the women's history movement, Lerner has also received honorary degrees from many colleges and universities. She has held teaching positions at the New School for Social Research, Long Island University, Columbia University, and Sarah Lawrence College, where she served as Director of the Master's Program in Women's History from 1972 to 1980. That year she was named Robinson-Edwards Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where she established a Ph.D. program in women's history. Since 1991, she has served as professor *emerita* at that institution.

Lerner, through her career in academia, as a political activist, and as the author of more than ten books and countless articles on the subject, has made great advances in establishing, legitimizing, and raising consciousness of the field of women's history. Her published works include *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (ed. 1972), *The Female Experience: An American Documentary* (1976), *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1993), and *Why History Matters* (1997). In addition to her historical works, she has also personalized the subject with her 2002 memoir, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*, which chronicles her life under fascism and her political activities in the United States in the 1950s.

Lerner has received numerous awards and honors throughout her career. From 1984 through 1991 she was the WARF Senior Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Wisconsin.

She has held fellowships and grants from the Social Science Research Council (1970-1971), the Rockefeller Foundation (1972), the National Endowment for the Humanities (1976 and 1987), the Ford Foundation (1978-1979) and the Lily Foundation (1979). She was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1980-1981 and a Resident Fellow at the Aspen Institute in 1977 and at the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy in both 1974 and 1991.

In 1980 she was elected president of the Organization of American Historians, the first woman to hold the position in fifty years. She was honored with the Award for Scholarly Distinction in 1992 by the American Historical Association. In 1994 Lerner was elected to the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, and in 1998 she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In 2002 Lerner became the first woman to receive the Bruce Catton Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Historical Writing, given by the Society of American Historians. Two prestigious awards have been established in her name: the Gerda Lerner Scholarship Fund at Sarah Lawrence College and the Gerda Lerner-Anne Firor Scott Prize for best doctoral dissertation in U.S. Women's History by the Organization of American Historians. Lerner's work has also been honored by her home country of Austria, most recently in 1996 with the Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Art.

## Introduction

On May 6, 2005, Gerda Lerner, a scholar of and pioneer in the field of women's history, delivered the twenty-third Charles Homer Haskins Lecture to members and friends of the ACLS. The lecture series, established in 1983 by ACLS President John William Ward in honor of the Council's first chairman, Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), is entitled “A Life of Learning.” Designed to pay tribute to a life of scholarly achievement, the lecturer is asked “to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar, on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning, to explore through one's own life the larger, institutional life of scholarship . . . to share with other scholars the personal process of a particular lifetime of learning.” The lecture is the highlight of the ACLS Annual Meeting.

Like Charles Homer Haskins, Gerda Lerner has devoted her life to historical scholarship and public service. Painstaking in her research and eloquent in her prose, she exemplifies the best in the scholarly tradition; yet her path to the academic world was far from traditional.

In her lecture, Lerner offered a vivid picture of a lifetime of intellectual and political engagement. A committed activist by the age of 15, she resisted the fascists in her native Austria; survived the blacklist in 1950s California; and organized grassroots efforts in the struggle for civil rights and women's equality. “My passionate commitment to Women's History,” she explains, “was grounded in my life.”

In the words of Professor Linda Kerber of the University of Iowa, president of the American Historical Association:

Nowadays, when feminist historians write prize-winning books that publishers are proud to produce, it is easy to forget that not very long ago,

women were—as a colleague once observed to me—a topic, not a subject. Gerda Lerner was not the first twentieth-century historian to embrace the history of women as a subject—before her were Mary Beard, Constance McLaughlin Green, Eleanor Flexner—nor was she the only historian of her generation to do so, but she has done more than most and arguably more than anyone to establish the history of women as a field of inquiry. Like other historians, since the 1960s she has been undertaking scrupulous research and writing lucid narratives; unlike historians in other fields, she had first to demand respect for her subjects.

Lerner has been a pathfinder in other areas of history as well. Long before internationalizing history became a common term, she was writing cosmopolitan history on the conviction that consequential historical questions demanded wide-ranging research of global scope.

Let me quote another of Linda Kerber's reflections on Lerner's career:

[W]hen I . . . think of our friendship and collegiality over the years, I realize that it has been nurtured by learned societies, constituent societies of ACLS, which have provided—especially to the women of my generation—a safe space and an important context for intellectual life and the human relations that sustain it. The learned societies—among them the Organization of American Historians, of which Gerda was the first immigrant and the second woman to serve as president, and the American Historical Association, which gave her its Award for Scholarly Distinction more than a decade ago—have provided the context in which

our cohort of feminist historians have conducted our careers. How much of our resilience, indeed our sanity, we owe to the learned societies . . . is hard to measure.

We do indeed hope that learned societies help nurture lives of learning.

ACLS was honored when Gerda Lerner accepted the invitation of our Executive Committee of the Delegates to deliver the 2005 Charles Homer Haskins Lecture. We are very pleased to bring it to a wider audience.

— *Pauline Yu, President  
American Council of Learned Societies*



# A Life of Learning

by

Gerda Lerner

It is a great and somewhat daunting honor to have been invited to give the Charles Homer Haskins lecture. Having read the lectures of some of my illustrious predecessors, I am humbled by it and made aware of my inadequacies in doing justice to it. I can only assume I was chosen because of my work as an academic in the past forty years of my life, yet I cannot respond to the theme “A Life of Learning,” as did the speakers before me, by giving an account of my intellectual development within an academic setting. Since I came late into academic life, my case is different from theirs.<sup>1</sup>

My life has been marked by breaks and discontinuities—abrupt fissures, destruction, loss and new beginnings. I am a survivor of terror and persecution. I have changed cultures and languages, nationality and class. I am an outsider as a woman, a Jew, an immigrant and a radical. I have also been a successful insider, an institution-builder and a respected member of my profession. My various transformations have been driven by necessity, imposed by outside events, yet they have been counterbalanced by certain lifelong continuities: my work as a creative writer; my pervasive preoccupation with historical events and the shaping of history; my deep commitment to social action and to responsibility in the public sphere and my lifelong

focus on the condition of women in society. And always I have tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice, between action and thought. I have tried to find the right balance between the life of the mind and what people call “real” life—the life in social context.

My life of learning started in political activism and risk-taking, in resisting authority and taking the consequences; it continued in working with the unorganized, with black and white women in low-paying jobs, with housewives, and then again, in academia, in working for the rights of minorities and women, fighting against discrimination and exclusionary practices and, in the last decade, working for the rights of part-time academics. I went from self-education to academic training, and became an advocate and creator of a new field—the history of women. Always working equally hard on accurate definition and theoretical clarity, and, on the creative side, the writer’s interest in the personal, the specific, the story.

Perhaps what I need to explain in this lecture is how, finally, it all came together.

I was born a middle-class Jewish girl in Vienna in 1920. My family always lived in a nest of security surrounded by the vast insecurity of a truncated former empire, repeatedly threatened by invasion and instability. To be born and raised Jewish in a country in which Catholicism was the state religion and anti-Semitism was an honored political tradition meant, from early on, to be branded as different. Jews were set apart—we were not “normal.” Fascists and anti-Semites were organized in political parties and, in the years of my growing up, became more and more powerful. Finally, it was not a question of whether they would come to power, but when.

As a Jew one was also constantly reminded of the long and bitter inheritance of Jewish history of persecution, destruction, then grudging tolerance, only to be followed again by another cycle of persecution and destruction.

What of the life of the mind? I received mixed messages in my family. My father, a pharmacist, exemplified the virtues of scientific inquiry, of respect for verifiable truths and replicable experiments.

My mother was a sort of feminist, heavily influenced by Ibsen, Scandinavian novelists, and French avant-garde thinkers. She was a self-defined Bohemian, rebelling against bourgeois standards of propriety, advocating sexual freedom and experimenting with all kinds of then novel practices, from vegetarianism to Yoga. She was unhappy in her marriage and revolted against the traditional roles of housewife and mother. She fashioned an alternate life style for herself that scandalized her mother-in-law, with whom she lived in a constant state of warfare. The fact that they lived in the same building—our family upstairs and Grandmother on the floor below—only sharpened their conflict. Grandmother was a strong-willed woman who considered it her duty to “save” her granddaughters from their mother’s influence. In this battle-ravaged landscape, my father, an essentially peaceful man and a good son, tried to mediate and keep up appearances. My mother was an artist and wanted to focus on that vocation, but she was not fully able to do so until the years of emigration, when she was free of familial responsibilities. She had a studio in the city, where she kept a kind of salon for young artists and writers. Despite their marital difficulties, my father helped her artistic development in every way.

The power struggle between my mother and my grandmother and the constant tensions in the home confronted me at an early age with the need to make choices among conflicting loyalties. In my teenage years I sided with my mother and regarded her as a victim of societal restrictions. I saw the world as divided into warring fields; I felt an obligation to choose among them.

In 1934 a violent civil war broke out in Austria, and in Vienna it raged virtually at my doorstep. After a week of bloody fighting, Austria's democracy was replaced by a clerical-fascist dictatorship. Parliamentary democracy and its parties were outlawed, trade unions were banned, and opponents of the new regime were jailed. Supported by the German government, an underground Nazi movement carried out a war of terrorism inside Austria, with the goal of Anschluss—the absorption of Austria into Nazi Germany.

In this climate of totalitarianism I learned to dispel my sense of despair and helplessness by exploring the world of ideas in books I found in our library. I read Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky and B. Traven's romantic novels about South American revolutionaries. I made pictures in my mind of prisons, torture, and brave, dedicated fighters for freedom. With school friends, I listened to American jazz and discovered Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Duke Ellington. These cultural impressions and the art films from Russia, France, and Italy, to which my mother took me, encouraged me toward a more active political involvement.

Still, it took nearly a year before I found the courage to participate, even in the smallest way, in underground activity. In my case this consisted of reading and passing on an underground newspaper and in helping through "Red Aid" a family whose father had been exiled as the result of the 1934 fighting. Even though these actions were relatively insignificant, each carried a six-months to one-year jail sentence with it, in case of discovery. I was full of fear, yet I lost the sense of defeatism that had so oppressed me; I felt myself coming closer to the antifascist movement, that unknown band of political resisters out there in the wider world.

In 1936 my parents arranged for me to spend six weeks in England as part of a student exchange program. Unfortunately, the suburban family to which I had been assigned turned out to be British fascists and anti-Semites. I managed to leave them and join a Socialist youth encampment in Wales that was run by J. B. S. Haldane, the eminent

biochemist, and his wife, both long-time pacifists who had recently publicly joined the Communist party. I succumbed to their charm, their warmth and the stimulation of their conversations, which seemed to encompass the world. I made friends with an Oxford student who made it his business to convert me to Marxism the proper way, which consisted of my reading the classics and then listening for hours as he explicated the finer points to me in true Oxford fashion. I swallowed these new and to me forbidden ideas the way a thirsty person swallows a cool drink. And I got an entirely new view of myself in a community of young people who looked upon me as a bit of a heroine for having survived youth in a fascist country and having shown some spirit of resistance. I returned from England with increased self-confidence, a stronger commitment to antifascism, and a new interest in Marxist thought.

During my years of adolescent exploration, I also came under the influence of Karl Kraus, the greatest satirist, and by many accounts the greatest modern poet, in the German language. In his magazine, *Die Fackel* (The Torch), he mercilessly satirized militarism, bureaucracy and, above all, the debasement of the German language. I attended his brilliant one-man readings of Shakespeare plays and Offenbach operettas—unforgettable performances. His powerful writing, his poetic force, his dedication to the structure of thought enraptured me. Years later, in making myself into a writer in English, my second language, his reverence for language guided me along the way. I knew I must learn more than vocabulary and syntax; I must learn the different culture expressed in the grammar and poetics of my new language, before I could become a writer. I consider myself a Kraus disciple to this day.

While still in Vienna, I was fortunate in attending, for eight years, a private *Realgymnasium* for girls that was headed by a Jewish woman director and staffed by well educated, highly motivated women teachers, many of whom held advanced degrees. I loved the rigorous training I received in that school and enjoyed the sense of

power I got from learning easily and with enjoyment. My favorite subject, German, was taught by a small, friendly woman who, as it turned out later, was an avid member of the underground Nazi party. I learned High and Middle High German from her and studied the ancient ballads in their original. I chose to write an honors thesis on twelve German ballads representative of the genre's changing styles from the Middle Ages to the present. The fact that I combined literary history and stylistic analysis in this early work foreshadowed my future interests. I managed to complete the essay just a month ahead of the Nazi take-over. That my Nazi teacher judged it excellent and felt it accrued credit to her would lead her to support me later, when I was jailed.

My classical *Gymnasium* training compared favorably with the best American high school and junior college education, but the existence of the Americas was barely acknowledged within it. These areas were considered marginal in the ethnocentric definition of humanist knowledge of pre-World War II Austria. Later, when I began to critique the exclusions and omissions of traditional history, I would recall the partial and biased training in history I had received. It was possible in my day to be a European intellectual, excellently trained and credentialed, and yet to be ignorant of the history and culture of several continents.

The Nazi occupation of Austria in March 1938 affected my family directly. Within two weeks my father was informed by a "friendly Nazi" that he was on a list of people to be arrested, and he left the country the same day. He was able to do so because he had five years earlier established a pharmacy in the small principality of Liechtenstein, a tiny neighboring country, and he had regularly gone there on business. His foresight and the fact that he never returned to Vienna saved our entire family by providing us with a place of residence, when all the world was closing its borders against Jews. Immediately, it led to two raids of our home by armed Nazis and a few weeks later to the arrest of my mother and myself. We were

separated from one another and put into a regular city jail, but we were not accused of anything. It later turned out we were being held as hostages in order to induce my father to return to Austria.

I did my jail time in a cell with two young political prisoners, who had to look forward to long sentences. They educated me in courage and resourcefulness, and when our starvation-level rations were cut in half for me, the Jew, they shared their rations equally with me. They were Socialists and lived by that ethic. I believed that I would never go free and that, if my underground work were discovered, I would end my days in a concentration camp. I learned that fear could be conquered by coming to terms with the worst possibilities and that fighting back, even in the most hopeless situations, would give rise to hope. I obsessively focused on getting out of jail in order to take my *Matura* exam—the final exam without which it was impossible ever to attend a university in Europe. The exam was scheduled for five weeks after my arrest. I wrote petitions on toilet paper; I made a pest of myself with all the guards; I asked to be taken with armed guard for my exam. No response, except the ridicule of the guards. The day after the supposed exam I was taken to a Gestapo interview and learned that all the activities concerning the *Matura* were in my record—yet I was returned to jail. A week later my mother and I were released, and I found out that the exam had been postponed for a week in order to install a Nazi examining board. I went to the exam the morning after my release and passed it with honors. I also learned that my German teacher and other Nazi teachers had petitioned the Gestapo in my behalf. Since I was the only student in my school to be arrested, they were sure it was a simple mistake.

My mother and I had been released from jail only on condition that we would leave the country forthwith. Then followed three months of police harassment, threats of being jailed again, and the overcoming of systematic bureaucratic obstacles put in our way by the government. Finally, shortly before the infamous *Kristallnacht*,

my mother, my younger sister and I were able to join my father in exile in Liechtenstein.

From having lived a privileged and sheltered childhood I had been violently plunged into adulthood, a stateless person, a refugee without property or civil rights. What did I learn?

Social definitions can turn privileged citizens with rights into outcasts; in fact, by Nazi definition, into vermin that can and should be killed.

Expropriation and the taking away of citizenship accomplish the same end.

One cannot survive alone. In order to survive, one must foster courage, accept help and help others.

In April 1939 I managed to immigrate to the United States, hoping to bring my family there later. This proved to be impossible due to U.S. restrictions on immigration. Having experienced the force of politics and power at first hand, I early became a dedicated antifascist. My intellectual encounter with Marxism continued during the years of emigration and my years as an unskilled, underpaid immigrant. Two and a half years after my arrival in the U.S., I married Carl Lerner, a theater director who wanted to work in film, and who was a Communist. We moved to Hollywood, where I became involved in radical left wing union politics and, later, in the struggle against the Hollywood blacklist. During my own years as a Communist, I was involved mainly in grassroots activities for nuclear disarmament, peace, racial justice and women's rights. For the next twenty years of my life I would live at the societal bottom level, where sheer survival comes first, action and efforts at organizing come next and abstract thought is a luxury, a leisure-time indulgence. Still, I continued my uphill struggle as a writer, publishing short stories, a novel, translations, and working on a musical and film scripts.



In the fall of 1963 I entered Columbia University. I was forty-three years old, my daughter was in college and my son was in high school. My husband was busy with a successful career as a filmmaker and teacher of film. I had shopped around before selecting a graduate school in order to be allowed to write the biography of the Grimké sisters, the only Southern women to become agents and lecturers of the American Anti-Slavery Society, as my dissertation. Columbia was the only place where the department chairman was willing to bend the institutional regulations so as to meet my needs. The topic, on which I had already been working for four years, was approved for my dissertation even before I had fulfilled my orals requirements. Due to this flexibility I was able to earn both the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in three years from the time I entered, while also teaching part-time at the New School and, for the final year, at Long Island University in Brooklyn.

In a way, my three years of graduate study were the happiest years of my life. It was the first time in my adult life I had time and space for thinking and learning. Greedy for knowledge the way only people who have long been denied an education can be, I gave up all recreation, social life, and other interests. More than anything else I was driven by an urgency to learn what I needed to know in order to carry out a passionate ambition, which by then had taken concrete shape in my mind.

During the interview at Columbia prior to my admission to the Ph.D. program, I was asked a standard question: why did I take up the study of history? Without hesitation I replied that I wanted to put women into history. No, I corrected myself, not put them into history, because they are already in it. I want to complete the work begun by Mary Beard. This announcement was, not surprisingly, greeted by astonishment. Just what did I have in mind? And anyway, what was Women's History? The question set me off into a lengthy explanation, on which I have played variations for the past forty years. I ended in somewhat utopian fashion: "I want Women's

History to be legitimate, to be part of every curriculum on every level, and I want people to be able to take Ph.D.s in the subject and not have to say they are doing something else.”

As if my age and unusual background did not sufficiently mark me as different from other students, I set myself further apart with this little speech, as being opinionated and having grandiose ambitions. But my real difficulty in graduate school was not so much style as substance—I could not accept the content of the curriculum nor the world view I was being taught.

In the twenty-five years since I had left school in Vienna, I had lived as an unskilled and later semi-skilled worker, a housewife, a mother, a community activist. In all these roles I met an active group of women who worked quietly and without public recognition, usually without pay and frequently without an awareness of the significance of the work they were doing. Political organizations were influenced by their work, yet no one would ever know of their existence through the writings of historians or through the media.

Now in one of the best graduate schools in the country I was presented with a history of the past in which women did not seem to exist—except for a few rulers or some who created disturbances. What I was learning in graduate school did not so much leave out continents and their people, as had my Viennese education, as it left out half the human race: women.

I found it impossible to accept such a version of the past as truth. I questioned it in seminars and in private discussions with faculty, and I was quickly made the target of ridicule by my teachers and classmates. Had I been a young woman just out of college, I probably could not have withstood this social pressure. Still, after a while, I made a place for myself and even won the respect of some of the faculty for my specialized knowledge. I learned sometimes from my professors, often against them, and much by trial and error, but

always I tested what I was learning against what I already knew from living. What I brought as a person to history was inseparable from my intellectual approach to the subject; I never accepted the need for a separation of theory and practice. My passionate commitment to Women's History was grounded in my life.

Professors Robert Cross and Eric McKittrick, who jointly supervised my dissertation, gave me considerable freedom in interpretation, but insisted on professional competency in documentation, for which I will always be grateful to them. Neither they nor any of my other teachers shared my interest in Women's History. The only exception was visiting professor Carl Degler whose course in U.S. social history included a section on women. He had long considered the history of women's reform activities an essential aspect of social history. I learned much from him and greatly appreciated his openness to my interests.

Still, my Columbia teachers provided me with a solid grounding in traditional history and historical method that sharpened my already ongoing critical discourse with Marxism. I learned by studying specific examples in depth, that any explanation that offered only single causes was flawed. Historical events were always multicausal. Marxist dialectics appeared more and more as a straitjacket.

When I graduated in 1966 Professor McKittrick gave me this well-meant advice: "When you go into the job market, don't tell anyone about your exotic specialty. You're a good social historian; let it go at that." I never took that advice, and it is perhaps due to that obstreperousness that I owe my career.

Having experienced the best of traditional history training, I also had learned its weak points, its unconsidered omissions and its unacknowledged assumptions. I thought I knew what needed changing. I had also studied the tactics that African American historians had used for more than four decades to legitimize their field of inquiry. This helped me to develop a strategic plan.

At age forty-six, I figured I had twenty years in the profession ahead of me, with luck. I reasoned I would have to impact on the academic world in a number of ways in order to make Women's History accepted: by actual research and writing; by proving the existence of sources; by upgrading the status of women in the profession; by proving that there existed student demand in this subject and by moving from there to designing courses and graduate programs. I made this plan in 1966 without knowledge of the spectacular progress that would be made in a short time due to the energy, zeal, and creativity of the women's movement and of Women's Studies. Fortified with my shiny credentials, I decided once and for all to stop defending what I was doing. I would just go ahead and let my work speak for itself.

I had first read Mary Beard's *Woman as Force in History* early in my undergraduate studies. Despite the obvious flaws in her work, I was struck by the simplicity and truth of her insight that women have always been active and at the center of history. Beard recognized the duality of women's position in society: subordinate, yet central; victimized, yet active. Her greatest contribution is the insight that focusing on women as victims obscures the true history of women. Women were, and always had been, agents in history. Beard also insisted that the history of women had to reflect the variations in the status of women at any given time according to class. She did not avoid the fact that women have been oppressors as well as oppressed and that class and sex interests have often been in conflict. Reading Mary Beard raised my feminist consciousness. I consider Mary Beard, whom I never met, my principal mentor as a historian.

Essentially, Mary Beard invented the concept of Women's Studies. Her critique of the androcentric academic establishment led her to envision new models for the education of women. I adapted her example to my uses, my own time. Unlike she, I was not willing to choose an amateur and marginal status in my profession. I believed that in order to write and research the history of women, historians

must have the best of traditional training and practice their craft with rigorous skill—and then they must go beyond it.

For me, working in archives led to a special kind of joy. I had the great good fortune, all during my dissertation research, to be able to work in the finest private collection of women's books then in existence, the library of Miriam Y. Holden, a member of the National Women's Party since its inception and a close co-worker of Alice Paul. She had also worked with Mary Beard, Eugenia Leonard, and Elizabeth Schlesinger toward establishing a national archive of women's history. After all their efforts had failed, Miriam Holden responded by systematically collecting printed sources on women of all nations, which were housed in her brownstone on New York's East Side. She abhorred the Dewey decimal system because it made it unnecessarily difficult to elicit the hidden history of women. In her library she ignored divisions by academic fields and made no separation between books by women and books about women. This library was a protected island in which the activities and thoughts of women were dazzlingly on display, front and center. Here I learned that the search for women's history must be interdisciplinary and that nontraditional methods and new questions would be needed to document women's past.

Mary Beard and Miriam Holden represented a direct, personal link to the earlier women's rights movement for me. They inspired me to seek an alternative to the then normative model of graduate education. In 1969 the ways for graduate students to become professionally known—by participating in conference sessions, offering papers or commentary, and getting articles published—were deep mysteries found accessible only through a student's male mentors. The absence of women and minority group members in the functions of the learned societies was glaringly obvious. Women were not on the boards of editors of journals; they were not on the boards of professional organizations; they seldom appeared on the programs of the annual meetings. All of this changed when, at the 1969 American Historical Association convention, women

historians organized the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP), a group co-chaired by Berenice Carroll and me. Our program was to advance the status of women in the profession, to oppose discrimination and to promote research and instruction in Women's History. One of our earliest goals, and one in which we were most spectacularly successful, was to change the undemocratic hiring practices of historians. It was slow, slogging work, but in the end we shattered the old boys' network and democratized the hierarchical, mystified way of running the professional organizations—a change that benefited men as well as women. For me, the culmination of that work was my election in 1982 as the first woman in fifty years to become president of the Organization of American Historians.

In 1972 I established the M.A. Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College. As were so many of my other ventures, this one was beset with difficulties, institutional resistance, and the need to secure outside funding. Still, the twelve years I spent at Sarah Lawrence were exciting intellectually. The foundation course of this program was interdisciplinary and was team-taught by Joan Kelly-Gadol, Sherry Ortner, Eva Kollisch and me. It was attended not only by our students, but by faculty from neighboring institutions. We created a teaching model that combined lectures, seminars, tutorials, and presentations by students based on their individual research. We created bibliographies and organized a number of conferences, in which students were part of the teaching team.

A summer seminar for high school teachers used a similar format and became a model program promoted nationwide by the American Historical Association. It was replicated at Stanford University, the University of North Carolina, the University of Minnesota, and Rutgers University. A 1979 Summer Institute for Leaders of Women's Organizations, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, introduced forty-three presidents and educational directors from most of the major women's organizations to Women's

History. The seminar participants decided, as their class project, to make Women's History Week a national annual event. This required organizing political pressure in every state to gain support for an annual joint resolution of Congress, signed by the President of the United States. They accomplished their goal—since 1980, Women's History Week (now Women's History Month) has inspired one of the biggest grassroots history movements in the country, bringing public programs on women to tens of thousands of communities, libraries, and civic organizations. My conviction that good history must move out of the academy and become part of public culture was amply justified by this experiment in history outreach.

In the early 1970s I helped initiate a major project for changing the way archives and libraries categorized primary sources on women. This project resulted not only in proving the existence of ample sources on the history of women in every state and in most archives, but it revolutionized the way archives classified and catalogued their holdings on women.

My scholarly work and writing developed at the same time as I functioned as an organizer of women historians, an administrator of graduate programs and a teacher. I came to the study of history through my interest in doing a biography of the Grimké sisters. This work allowed me to combine my newly acquired scholarly skills with those of the writer. The book, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels against Slavery*, has had a long life ever since 1967 and has just been reissued in a revised edition [2004].

During my research on this book, I had come across many primary sources on the activities of black women in the antislavery movement. Here was another group whose history had been forgotten due to their double invisibility as women and as African Americans. At that time this was a subject that had not yet been recognized as a valid field of inquiry. In 1972 I published *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* with a bibliographic essay that pointed to the vast amount of source material yet to be explored.

I am happy to say that the book helped in the development of a new scholarly field: African American Women's History.

My comparative study of women of different races and cultures taught me that no generalization about women as a group could be valid unless differences of class, race, and ethnicity were taken into consideration. The fact that I was concerned with these questions long before African American scholars attacked the predominant focus on white women in feminist scholarship derived from my life experience—from my years of living in a racially mixed community and from my organizational work with black women. I have retained my interest, both in research and teaching, in the construction of differences and in the ways patriarchal power exploits such differences for dominance.

Another vexing question that then occupied me and other Women's History specialists was the question of periodization. Several of us had early on challenged the unexamined assumption that historical periodization was a sort of neutral grid that equally applied to men and women. But it turned out that many of the major advances and important turning points in historical development, such as the Renaissance, various revolutions and wars, and industrialization, had notably different impacts on women than on men. If that was the case, what might be a periodization fitting for women? In 1970 I had a book under contract in a series, to be called *Women in the Making of the Nation*. I set that book aside to finish the documentary history of black women, but when I tried to resume work on it, I found myself seriously blocked. I simply could not find a way to do a book about women organized by a traditional chronology. The solution came in a flash of insight—I found a new title long before I knew how well it fitted my content. The title *The Female Experience* helped me to reorganize my research according to female life stages and to stages of the growth of feminist consciousness. It was amazing how, all at once, the same material offered new insights and a powerful illumination which went far



beyond the content of the book. Other scholars were inspired by this book to break out of the gridlock of the chronology of wars and conquests to deal with women in history.

Step by step, through innovations in teaching, through exposure to hitherto hidden primary sources, through organizational experience in the profession and, above all, through close collaboration with other scholars in the field, the outlines of a framework for doing Women's History began to emerge.

In the early stages of the development of the new Women's History, I tried to create a conceptual framework and theoretical principles for placing women in history. These were published in two book collections of articles, *The Majority Finds Its Past* and *Why History Matters*. Later, as I was training Ph.D. students in Women's History at the University of Wisconsin, I became more and more concerned about setting new standards for such training. I developed a "Theories of Feminism" course—essentially a historiography of feminist thought—that became a foundation course for the graduate program. I created a practicum course that enabled students to combine outreach work with their theoretical training. Above all, students needed to learn what analytic questions to ask and how to distinguish important from unimportant questions.

To me, the question of the origin of women's subordination seemed the most important. The traditional patriarchal answer to it was either religious or biological: men and women were inherently different and therefore performed different functions in society. Such explanations supported women's inequality in society by legitimizing it as God-given or natural. Modern feminists, rejecting this view, were offering a variety of explanations, many of them based on Frederick Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. It seemed to me important to explore whether an explanation based on valid historical evidence could be found. For me, this project also meant finally coming to terms with my Marxist past.

My commitment to Marxism had held up until the Khrushchev revelations, even as I became more and more disillusioned with Old Left politics. Ever since the late 1950s I believed that Marxist thought was in error in regard to race and ethnicity in its insistence that class subsumed these categories. Marxist thought was also unable to adequately explain or improve the position of women, because it dealt solely with their economic oppression.

As a strong advocate of women's agency in history, I needed to understand why women had over the centuries colluded in their own oppression by passing the rules of patriarchy on to their children of both sexes. I wanted also to understand why there had never been women who built important explanatory or philosophical systems.

When I began seriously to undertake a study of the origins of patriarchy, I found myself confronting the psychological obstacles other women before me must have experienced. Who was I to try such a difficult task? How was I qualified for it? My head was full of the great men of the past I would have to argue with, and there were no female guides to help me. To give me courage, I looked at who the major theorists on the subject were—theologians, philosophers, sociologists and journalists. I discovered that none of them, including Engels, had been academically trained for their task. This encouraged me to go ahead. Since I had a Guggenheim grant for a year, I used the time to give myself a graduate reading course in anthropology and in Ancient Near Eastern studies. Still, throughout the eight years it took me to write *The Creation of Patriarchy*, I frequently felt as though I had jumped off a cliff into a raging river.

Engels claimed that the development of private property, followed by class interest, led to the subordination of women, which he postulated had happened as a historic event, one he called “the world historical defeat of the female sex.” His theories were based on ethnographic studies that have since been largely disproven. In

my research for my book I found that while Engels had been correct in postulating a connection between the agricultural revolution of the Bronze Age, the rise of militarism, the development of private property and the rise of the patriarchal family, he had been wrong as to causes, sequence and historicity. It was not private property that led to sex discrimination and the formation of classes; it was gender oppression—the enslavement of women—that preceded class oppression. Slavery, almost everywhere in the world, was first used against women and children, because men had not yet learned how to subdue captured males to slave service. Captured women were raped and stayed with their children. The invention of slavery as a means of recruiting a labor force taught men how to organize difference—of tribal adherence, of race, of religion—into dominance. Enslaved women and children were the first property. When archaic states were organized, they transformed these property relations into legal structures and into the foundation of the state. This development took place over a period of nearly 1500 years and was not “an over-throw.” Patriarchy was instituted with the consent and cooperation of women and was, in fact, at one time a rational institution. By the time science and philosophy were invented in the first millennium B.C.E., the patriarchal order had already existed for centuries and was taken for granted as being normal and God-ordained. Patriarchy seemed beyond challenge.

What I learned from writing this book shattered the last remnants of my adherence to Marxist thought. It also led me to other questions. How did women survive under patriarchy? How did they resist it? I tried to answer these questions in my book, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. Work on this book brought me to a new understanding of the ambiguous role of religion as an institution which fortified the subordination of women by asserting that it was God-given. On the other hand, religion became the location of women’s most radical emancipatory assertion, developed over 700 years—namely, that God spoke to women and authorized their striving for equality.

Because women were for millennia educationally deprived, they were denied the ability to develop systems of knowledge and to define the content of higher education. The most advanced women thinkers were forced into dialogue with male thinkers and were denied both authority and knowledge of their own history. The implication for the present is that those wanting finally to achieve women's full participation in the intellectual work of humankind need to abolish not only discrimination, but its long-range consequences in the thinking and socialization of women.

Even though I have spent much of my career attempting to change academic institutions, I have enjoyed the long-deferred benefits of insider status. I could not have written these two books had it not been for the generous support I received from the University of Wisconsin. They supported my founding of a Ph.D. program in Women's History and awarded me two chairs, which gave me time and research assistance for my scholarly work. I am very grateful for this support and for the many foundations that have, over the years, helped my various projects. I take these as recognition that the changes for which I worked were perceived as constructive and in line with the best interest of these institutions.

After my retirement from the University of Wisconsin, I wrote *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*. With this work, I reclaimed my voice as a writer and attempted to explain to myself and perhaps to others how I became who I am.

Up until quite recently, history as a profession has spoken in the voice of exclusion, in which a small elite of trained male intellectuals has interpreted the past in its own image and in its own voice. In the short span of forty years, women scholars have challenged the absurd assumption that one half of humankind should perpetually present its own story of the past as being a universally valid story. All kinds of groups who have been previously denied a past have reclaimed their human heritage. This development has been and is truly a historical event in world history. We have taken many steps

in the direction of democratizing and humanizing the academy. We have shown that the formerly “anonymous” have voices and can tell their stories. We have unearthed formerly ignored sources and have learned new ways of interpretation. We have questioned what activities historians designate as significant. We have created networks, organized conferences, and initiated over sixty graduate programs in Women’s History. It has been a rich experience of sharing knowledge, reinforcing and inspiring one another, and engaging in sharp and often critical debate. Theory and practice, life and thought, have fused.

It has been my great privilege to be part of the most exciting intellectual movement of the twentieth century.

### Notes

1. I am very grateful for the helpful criticism and comments on this lecture given to me by Stephanie Lerner, Elizabeth Minnich and Edward Balleisen.