

treatise, corresponded with her mentor and, gaining courage from the encounter, went on to establish a very successful girl's grammar school in London.

What the writing throughout this section reveals is the growth of a community of women writers who gain support and strength from their number; while the constant call to 'modesty' is never completely silenced, most of these authors move beyond that.

The work of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, popularly known as 'Mad Madge,' is given the space it deserves (although one always wishes for more in an anthology of this kind). Margaret Cavendish was the first woman in England to publish a broad spectrum of work under her own name (some thirteen volumes of poetry, drama, philosophic and scientific observations in a fifteen-year span). She was obviously a woman

who had a room of her own and the five hundred pounds to go with it. Margaret married wealth and made excellent use of it. Throughout her life she continued to advise women about the pitfalls in marriage: "a bad husband is far worse than no husband at all, and to have unnatural children is more unhappy than to have no children."

It is this sort of response to the "Whole Duty of Women" that makes this anthology such a treasure-trove. Goreau has brought together some fifty writers – women who are very aware of the societal strictures placed on them, yet who risk denunciation and ridicule in order to publish. And as the century progresses the female pen gets stronger; the women produce love poetry, odes, drama, essays and sermons. Their writing reflects the entire scope of knowledge that is now open to their inquiry. Goreau's remarks about

Penelope Aubin, novelist, who is the last writer presented in the book, are telling: "her attitude to authorship seems far less caught up in the kind of guilt, anguish, or equivocation that earlier women writers manifested." This then is the process which this book traces, thematically and structurally. The writers presented here are quite clearly the foremothers of current feminist writing. The issues that preoccupy the seventeenth-century writers are basically those issues which Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olsen (among many others) analyze in their respective books on 'Motherhood' and *Silences*. With Angeline Goreau's latest book in hand the line across the centuries stands clear: the strength and comfort it affords are immeasurable.

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*\*This is the title of a drama written by an anonymous woman (or women) in 1640.*

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## DAMES EMPLOYÉES: THE FEMINIZATION OF POSTAL WORK IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY FRANCE

Susan Bachrach. The Institute for Research in History and the Haworth Press, Inc., 1984.

*Cynthia A. Dent*

Susan Bachrach's *Dames Employées* is a valuable addition to a growing literature on the history of women in the work place. Its subject is the feminization of the Postal Administration which became the largest employer of women in clerical jobs in nineteenth-century France. Bachrach emphasizes that this was a period of transition when women who had traditionally been employed, for the most part, as domestic servants or seamstresses in the garment industry, began to move into clerical jobs. Her study is solidly based on sources from departmental and Parisian archives, records of relevant Ministries, and contemporary periodicals and journals.

In answer to the question of why the numbers of women in the postal services increased significantly, Bachrach points to the importance of external factors such as the close connection between postal services and a rapidly expanding economy. This expansion was not accompanied by a change in attitudes about the traditional role of women in the home. On the contrary, attitudes towards women's

work by administrators and politicians remained paternalistic. Thus positions for women were viewed as a kind of charity towards widows and single women without dowries which would solidify family ties. Women were not, therefore, considered as having equal rights with men in terms of job access, remuneration, and possibilities for advancement. For example, while women were accepted as managers of provincial post offices in the early nineteenth century, they were not to be found in major commercial centres or departmental capitals. By an ordinance of 1844 they were restricted to offices yielding less than 1000 francs, and were excluded from managing *bureaux composés* (offices which contained both a director and a salaried clerk) where they would oversee male clerks. Moreover, they were effectively prevented from advancing to the higher ranks by the segregation of male and female jobs, and they were not appointed as managers of urban post offices.

When women did enter the urban work force, they did so in response to a deliberate policy of feminization put in place to alleviate a combined budgetary crisis, and a concomitant advancement crisis for male clerks. Women, who could be hired for lower wages and prevented from rising in the ranks to compete with men, seemed to provide a solution to both problems. Nevertheless, to further reduce male fears of competition, women tended to be placed in telephone and telegraph services – which in France were run

by the Postal Administration, not in the postal services themselves which remained dominated by men. The result was a tripling of the number of women in combined urban telephone and telegraph services between 1890 and 1898.

The feminization of urban postal work aroused tremendous opposition which was expressed in the major postal employee journals. Opposition from both the employees and the general public was reflected in the Chamber of Deputies which gave only limited support. The result was that the policy of feminization ended after 1890. It was not until the crisis of war in 1914-18 necessitated the replacement by women of men drafted into the army that the male-dominated bastion of urban postal services was breached.

Bachrach makes it clear that neither equality nor independence were to be gained by the increasing number of women who sought and received work in the Postal Administration of late nineteenth-century France. Yet there were advantages to be gained. For women of modest background and education, work as a *dame employée* or a *receveuse des postes* might provide a needed dowry, for even feminist postal workers believed that woman's most important role was as wife and mother. Postal work was also socially respectable. Furthermore, despite modest salaries and restricted opportunities, postal employees were not subject to seasonal unemployment or heavy manual labour. Nor were they forced to leave the service on getting married, as was the

case in state-run services in Germany, England, and Switzerland, and in privately owned services in the United States. Thus in comparison to women in other countries, or to those employed in the garment industry, in domestic service, or as shopkeepers, women employed in the Postal Administration were among the *élite* of working women.

By the end of the century, too, there were many more jobs available and

opportunities of employment for women of restricted social and educational backgrounds had expanded. However, Bachrach is careful to point out that despite these advantages, the character, conditions and prestige of the work of female postal employees had declined. Their jobs demanded fewer skills, less responsibility and conferred less social prestige than they had a century earlier. Nor had they advanced in equality. Com-

pared to their male counterparts, women were paid less and were denied access to advancement. In the final analysis, women working as postal employees at the turn of the century appear to have lost ground compared to the women who had managed post offices in such major centres as Toulouse and Marseille and had run privately-owned local mail services in Paris in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

## INDEPENDENT WOMEN: WORK AND COMMUNITY FOR SINGLE WOMEN 1850-1920

Martha Vicinus. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press/Virago Press Limited, 1985.

### *Felicity Hunt*

The acknowledgements in *Independent Women* pay tribute to many scholars in women's history. Here Martha Vicinus gives us some indication of the extraordinary range of sources on which she has drawn for this study, both primary and secondary, and of the nature of the work, which is a skilful, indeed awesome, blend of synthesis and original research. Professor Vicinus has presented the fruits of her years of scholarship in the Victorian period. In doing so she has rewarded us with new material and new interpretations and at the same time has both suggested new areas of investigation and made more accessible the work of others.

In her study Professor Vicinus takes as her central theme the work of single middle class women and this she explores in a number of different areas. Work amongst the poor either in church communities or settlements, nursing, education both in schools and colleges, are all considered, as is the suffragette movement. In the chapter on church communities, for example, we see the author at her best. The whole idea of non-Catholic religious communities of women was new to the Victorians; an idea which many found questionable or even undesirable. There was a deep suspicion amongst Anglicans and nonconformists of anything which smacked of 'popery' whilst others were skeptical of the capacity of women to live and work and organise in an all-female community. Yet at the same time the whole idea seemed to

offer an obvious solution to the problem of 'redundant' women. Professor Vicinus traces the different options open to women of a religious and philanthropic bent. Gradually the choices extended to include High Church orders or Evangelical diaconates; communities which represented different types of commitment ranging from a consecrated life of prayer to a more conventional pattern of good works.

Throughout the book we are reminded of how much these communities of women had to experiment in extending the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour. The restrictions were complex and could entail several dimensions. Evangelical religious communities had to consider dress very carefully for a uniform might be mistaken for a nun-like habit. In contrast uniforms for nurses raised separate problems for here class distinctions could have as much to do with uniform regulation as notions of hygiene or professional appearance.

The use of a diversity of contemporary sources is an important aspect of the book. Professor Vicinus is not engaged in a series of institutional histories but an exploration of the individual and collective experiences of women in communities which were unprecedented in their organisation and functions. The blend of diary material and other (often unpublished) autobiographical sources with contemporary comment and institutional records results in a highly detailed account of how women experienced life in these communities. The whole subject of women's friendships, not only in the collective sense or manifest as community spirit but also between individuals, is given special attention. In the chapter on women's colleges the author explores the experience, so new for many Victorian women, of 'an independent intellectual life.' In the process she reveals much of the emotional trauma involved for

women who were stepping outside the accepted private sphere of womanly activity and cutting themselves off from either familial or marital support. How real that support may have been we can in fact surmise from the eagerness with which so many single middle class women embraced alternative life styles. In this context the discussion of what the author characterises as homoerotic friendships is particularly fascinating and suggests a dimension to the lives of Victorian women in England which has been left largely unexplored in the past.

Only occasionally does the book strike a problematic note. The penultimate essay on the suffragette movement deals with a community of a very different sort from those discussed in earlier chapters. The idea of a community of spirit within a national movement comprising women of all classes and differing marital statuses does not seem to be more than an echo of the community lives described beforehand. Likewise, although it is true that the National Union of Teachers (NUT) paid only lip-service to the professional needs of its woman members, we should not dismiss the other unions for women teachers, whether it be the feminist National Union of Women Teachers or the thriving professional Associations of Head Mistresses and Assistant Mistresses, since all these clearly did combine both a sense of highly developed professionalism and the opportunity of an alternative support community.

But these are minor irritants. *Independent Women* opens up to us much that is new and exciting and in doing so explores and explains the strains and ambiguities, the fulfilment and joys, of the lives of single middle class Victorian women who turned their backs on convention and sought alternative lives and work.