

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

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### *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.