

Women's Studies journal makes me uneasy; but the suspicion that its authors may have been hoping to cash in on the Women's Studies boom and use up some of their old notes at the same time makes me even more uneasy.

The book is divided into two parts: the first provides social, legal, and religious background from the early Middle Ages; the second, longer section presents a series of portraits of seven medieval women.

Problem number one: explicit credit ought to have been given to Eileen Power, whose 1924 volume, *Medieval People*, pioneered the model on which the Gies' work is based: drawing on contemporary records such as estate books, bishops' registers, and family letters, she recreated the lives of 'ordinary people' in a series of sketches. The Gies substitute 'women' for 'ordinary people,' but not to acknowledge their debt seems faintly stingy.

Problem two: principles of organization are often obscure; even chapter one is something of a jumble. It begins by announcing the book's premise, valid enough to be sure — that conventional history has neglected women because it concerns itself with 'male-dominated activities' — and proceeds to discuss various difficulties involved in writing about the Middle Ages. This much really is a preface. Then follow (1) a list of 'elements that affect a woman's life' (obstetrical practice, marriage, property and legal rights, etc.); (2) two pages on Classical, Hebrew, and early Christian misogyny; (3) two pages on Christine de Pisan, a 14th-15th century poetess.

(1) The list is tantalizing but its purpose here is not clear; it is pursued only sporadically in the portraits. (2) The pages on pre-medieval misogyny are fun, particularly the quotes about menstrual fluid and

its fabulous qualities (it sours wine, dulls mirrors, drives dogs mad, rusts iron, kills caterpillars), but more relevant would be hard evidence that the Middle Ages shared these beliefs. (3) The mini-portrait of Christine de Pisan seems out of place, since part two supposedly contains the portraits; but as it happens, Christine has already been 'done' in another recent book about medieval women (*The Role of Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. R.T. Morewedge, 1975, Ch. 5, an item which also might have been mentioned by the Gies). It looks uncomfortably as though, not knowing what else to do with (1), (2), and (3), they decided to cross their fingers and shove them all in together under the ample umbrella of 'Women in History.'

Problem two (cont'd.): Chapter four deteriorates into a jumble as well. It starts out with an interesting enough examination of medieval ambivalence towards women, goes on to look at some roots of anti-feminism and the literary expression of this double view of women (the objects both of satire and of romance). But again the Gies start scratching their heads and asking, 'What are we going to do with the rest of this stuff? Do you think we can squeeze it in here?' So the rest of the chapter glances in rapid succession at questions of disciplining wives, women's 'contribution' in reproduction, supposed levels of sexual desire in women, contraception and the attitude of the Church, prostitution and the attitude of the Church. We are left wondering what these items have in common beyond the general fact that they pertain to women.

The problem of inconsistent quality continues into the book's second section. The range of portraits, stretching from a 12th-century German nun to a 15th-century English

gentlewoman, indicates that the authors' aim was to cover as many centuries, countries, and social classes as possible. Chances are that fewer portraits done with greater care would have made for a better study.

The chapter on Hildegard the abbess describes her extraordinary career and, in addition, provides another umbrella that permits the inclusion of some general information about women and monasticism (but see also Powers' *Medieval People*, ch. IV, 'Madame Eglentyne,' which ought to have been cited) and a few references to other noteworthy women religious of the Middle Ages, perhaps somewhat randomly selected: puzzling, for example, that they should give two pages to the minor (if colourful) figure of Margery Kempe, and fail even to mention Julian of Norwich, the greatest female English mystic of the Middle Ages.

In contrast, the portrait of Blanche of Castile sticks to its subject and is the stronger for it. Married at 12, widowed at 38, she became the monarch of France, first guarding the interests of her son, to be Louis IX, until his majority, then, in fact, continuing to reign as the power behind the throne. A very tough lady comes across: razing the villages of rebellious barons, having riotous students pitched into the Seine, running the country when her son, as king, decided to go off on a Crusade and got himself captured by the Saracens. A fuller sense of what her life was like would have been nice (what did she wear? what did she eat? where did she live?): she's an impressive enough figure that we would like to be able to imagine her in action.

Eleanor de Montfort's sketch, though dwelling at length on the struggles between Eleanor and her husband Simon on one hand, and her brother Henry III on the other,

unfortunately fails to project anything about her personality except that she was obstinate and litigious. More successful are the portraits of Margherita Datini and Margaret Paston, probably because they are based largely on letters written to their oft-absent spouses: both women were attached to their husbands and were responsible for managing extensive households in their absence, so there was cause for frequent correspondence. We get a picture of the Datini house and furniture, its garden, Margherita's clothing and accessories, her 'servant problems,' her loneliness and resentment at her husband's long trips from home. Of the English Margaret we get a less clear impression, but her loyalty to her husband as wife, homemaker, and business partner is evident.

The Gies, on occasion, show themselves to be quite capable of effectively combining fruitful research and serviceable prose. A rigorous treatment on their part might have brought together the book's diverse elements, but, overall, we get the impression that they couldn't be bothered to make the effort. And this is what's troubling about *Women in the Middle Ages*: it's too important an opportunity to have been botched through lack of care. There is a great deal of important material here; it's a pity the presentation could not have been more thorough. ☉

In/Sights

Compiled by Joyce Tenneson Cohen, David R. Godine, Publisher, Boston, 1978, pp. 134, softcover \$10.95
Diane Schoemperlen
From more than 4,000 photographs submitted for this project, Joyce Tenneson Cohen has selected 125 black-and-white self-portraits by 66

women photographers to form a compact and well-organized book. The first section of the book includes portraits by 60 photographers and the second is a collection of six portfolios by women working more extensively in self-portraiture. In her introduction, Cohen explains that the book is 'the first attempt to show what women are really seeing — and what they are saying about what they see — when they look at themselves through the camera's eye.' Cohen then goes on to point out patterns and themes which recur in the photographs that follow. These categories serve as a useful key to examining the images themselves.

When I first looked through the photographs, my immediate inclination was to rush out and show it to all my women friends. *In/Sights* is a book you instinctively want to share. I showed it first to a particular friend who had been going through a year-long struggle to be a separate person, a 'self'. Her reaction to the book was somewhat less enthusiastic than mine and she said sadly, 'If someone asked me to do a self-portrait, I couldn't do it.' Which set me to thinking about how I would fulfill such an assignment myself. No matter what else the book may provide, the exercise in self-examination which it generates is an important achievement.

Many of the portraits are very frank ... 'This is what I see when I look at me.' Others are more muted, almost wistful ... 'This is what I want to see when I look at me.' The play between what you see and what you want to see (and what you think you *should* see) is fascinating, neither vision being any more or less necessary and defining than the

other. In many of these portraits, there is a sense of process, growth, becoming — they are not static statements. They explore intimately the process of discovering a 'self', as well as the experience of being one. I would be curious to see how each of these 66 women would choose to portray themselves five years from now, even one year from now. The book shows self-image as a process, not a final achievement.

Not all of these women are alone in their portraits. Some include other women, men, children, animals. The self does not exist in a vacuum and it is unrealistic to think that your self-image cannot be touched by the important external realities (and this must include husbands and lovers) which are part of your life. Does your self-image help determine how others see you, or does the way others see you help determine your self-image? This is a chicken and the egg question. There will clearly be times in all of our lives when this relationship sways more to one side than the other. There are portraits here which reveal all degrees of influence.

In the last section of the book, each of the 66 photographers comments on her own work. It was wise to put this section at the end of the book where it does not interfere with the visual impact of the pictures themselves. Some of these brief statements are very powerful in their own right. For example, Karen Clemens writes of her self-portrait: 'Sometimes I wish I could be this person. I spend a lot of time pretending that I'm not. I get no help from my friends — nobody will let me hide in their house.'

After the photographs, there is also an insightful

essay called 'Self As Subject: A Female Language' by Patricia Meyer Spacks. She discusses the photographs from a more academic point of view and concludes:

'This group of photographs declares a female consciousness sensitive to the restrictions of society, capable of surmounting them by knowing them inclusively. The pictures re-create a collective icon of woman as a being of power emerging from mystery.'

It is not necessary to agree with all of the images presented in the book, it is only necessary to accept and believe them. No matter what my own self-image might be now or five years from now, there is not one of these images that I cannot readily imagine some woman somewhere having and sharing.

The book as a whole is a warm flow, life-giving, intimate, and strong. Somehow it makes me think of blood and we all know about that. ☉

D'Sonoqua: An Anthology of Women Poets of British Columbia

V. 1 & 2, ed. Ingrid Klassen, *Intermedia*, Vancouver, B.C. 1979, V. 1-pp. 83, V. 2-pp 91, paperback
Marsha Mildon

This two-volume anthology of B.C. women poets *D'Sonoqua*, arrived in my mailbox — coincidentally — fortuitously — three days before I myself was moving to British Columbia. Aha, I thought, an introduction, a Cook's Tour of the literary landscape.

D'Sonoqua certainly does travel an immense literary landscape — 32 poets with different styles, subject areas, philosophies. It includes the better-known landmarks, Marlatt, Fiamengo, Musgrave — displayed in familiar poses. And, most exciting for me,

it introduces glimpses of new voices, poets I hadn't read before but will return to. Perhaps this is enough to ask of any poetry anthology.

Like any tourist on a guided tour however, I found myself asking 'why these landscapes?'; 'why these poets and these poems?' The introduction to *D'Sonoqua* admits that these poems 'are not linked by an identifiable local idiom or by marked similarity in style.' Later it says: 'It is interesting to read these poets in one collection, to see how they reverberate together, what kind of harmonies or sparks they set off.' The question to be addressed then is are there indeed harmonies or sparks here? Is the anthology any more than a guided tour?

I believe it is more, due primarily to its rather unique editorial process. Ingrid Klassen, editor of the anthology, states in her preface that the poets were invited to submit their 'favourite' poems, from which she made her choices. We should expect, then, that these poems, these favourite poems, should tell us something about what excites poets in their own poems, and that in turn, may tell us something about the process of art.

In fact, many of these poems do have something in common. The most exciting poems in the anthology explore that peculiar space where incident, real world perception, poet and poem all meet. They attempt to pinpoint the precise moment in the spinning of straw into gold when the material is both straw and gold. The poets do not, I suspect, know the secret, but they recognize the moment, and these moments become their favourite poems. Any number of the poems in this anthology could be analyzed from this perspective. In particular Rona Murray's 'The Death of the Bear', Marilyn Bowering's 'Rose Harbour