

MARY BEARD - FEMINIST HISTORIAN

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It is not unusual to find that many a college romance has led to marriage, but the college romance of Charles and Mary Beard did, indeed, have an unusual aspect to it. For not only did it lead to marriage, it led to the collaboration of two very gifted people on a number of books that were to make History while they were writing about history. Charles and Mary met while they were both students at DePauw University in Indiana. Charles (born in 1874) was two years older than Mary, but he completed his Ph.B. in 1898, a year after she completed hers. He went on to England to do post-graduate work at Oxford, then returned to marry Mary in 1900.

They returned to Oxford where Charles was instrumental in founding Ruskin College and Mary gave birth to her daughter Miriam. It was while she was in England that Mary met and became greatly influenced by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, the militant British suffragettes.

When they returned from England, Charles received an appointment teaching History at Columbia University and they settled into an apartment near the University. However, we would be very wrong if we envisioned Mary as the typical domesticated housewife and helpmate who merely worked with her husband on his projects. Mary was occupied by her home and family for in 1907, her son William was born. But she was also very much a personality in her own right. She was fortunate that from the beginning she and Charles were able to afford servants so that she was able to devote much of her time and energies to the research and writing that went into her books and public speaking.

The New York Times has claimed that Mary was "no ardent feminist" which was something they gleaned from her writings, but we have learned from a short conversation with her son-in-law, Dr. Alfred Vagts, that Mary was an ardent feminist. It was only the restraint of Charles, who insisted that the family come first, that prevented her from taking militant actions during the suffragette movement in the early 20th Century. Mary, however, was able to express her great interest in women through many of her writings and speeches.

"It would seem", she once said, "that if there is in all history any primordial force, that force is woman, continuer, protector, preserver of life, instinctive, active, thoughtful, ever bringing thought back from sterile speculation to the center of life and work"1

She saw women as equal partners from the beginning of humankind.

"The first sharp distinction between animal and the human race was made by woman when she started industries and agriculture during the cave years".²

Mrs. Beard was extremely productive and once her first book, American Citizenship, written in collaboration with Charles in 1913, was published, she continued to write and publish extensively both alone and in collaboration with her husband. It cannot be denied that the three or four basic American History books written in collaboration with Charles, The Rise of American Civilization (1929), The Making of American Civilization (1937) and America in Mid-Passage (1939) were indeed the most prestigious, for they became the classic American History textbooks in many American colleges during the 1930s and 40s.

However, it is the books written without collaboration that have probably had the most lasting effect on the women's movement as we know it today. As early as 1915, Mrs. Beard was impelled to distinguish the work done by women in her book Women's Work in Municipalities. In 1920, her Short History of the American Labor Movement reflected another of her great interests.

In 1922, she and Charles went to Japan to study Japanese cities. They were forced to return home by the great Japanese earthquake of 1923.

In 1931 another book was published On Understanding Women, and in 1934, she edited Laughing Their Way and America Through Women's Eyes. America Through Women's Eyes was a compilation of American women from the Colonial period to the 1920s. The point was clearly made that "women could be both praised for, and charged with some of what had happened in the country's growth. They had not just sat around knitting samplers and bearing offspring while the men wrote history in blood and blunders."

In 1937, Mrs. Beard proposed a World Center for Women's Archives, a female preserve. She charged that women had not appeared in history because men had written history and had chosen to write about themselves.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Mrs. Beard finally wrote Women as a Force in History in 1946. Writing in the "Twentieth Century Classics Revisited" issue of the magazine Daedalus in the 1974 Winter volume, Carl N. Dengler observes that the book is not, unfortunately, a great masterpiece of literature and is in some ways quite a disappointment. Mrs. Beard starts her book with references to contemporary women who were then making their mark on current events - such as the heads of the WACS and WAVES in

World War II, but who ultimately do not retain any significant historical impact. But she does go on to trace the beginning of women as second-class citizens as reflected in Blackstone's Law. Since we know that Betty Friedan was in college in 1946, are we making an outlandish assumption that this book, or some of its attitudes may well have rubbed off on her? In any case, perhaps one of the most important Women as a Force in History was indeed, Mary Beard, herself.

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Footnotes

¹New York Times, August 15, 1958, p. 22.

²Ibid.