

REVIEW OF *BRIGHT EPOCH: WOMEN & COEDUCATION IN THE AMERICAN WEST*¹ BY ANDREA G. RADKE-MOSS

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Editor's note: Shawn is acting chair of the Department of History, Geography, and Political Science, and Andrea is a faculty member in that department.

Many Latter-day Saints tend to be suspicious of the women's movement. Women's rights advocates are usually on the opposite side of political fences from most Mormons, and high-profile issues, such as the failed Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and 80s and the volatile issue of abortion in recent years, have led to considerable antipathy in LDS culture towards the movement. But a blanket condemnation blinds us to advances that have come about because of the efforts of female reformers in the past. Indeed, Latter-day Saints today embrace many ideas that were at one time or another considered forward-thinking by the women's movement. For example, most of us today are in favor of allowing women to vote and sit on juries, control their own property in marriage, travel freely, hold positions of authority, and have access to education. Condemnations of wife abuse and admonitions to respect women are standard in priesthood meetings in the Church. Even the more sticky issue of women working outside the home for wages has substantial acceptance in LDS culture.

It would be well for us as Latter-day Saints to be better informed about these kinds of changes since we are embracing many of them, and women's history can assist us in this. In its early forms in the 1970s and 80s, women's history began demonstrating some of the contributions of women to our heritage, but the tone was often strident and the single-minded focus on oppression lacked nuance. The field has matured since then, often demonstrating balance and nuance while still effectively exposing the power structures of society. Andrea Radke-Moss' book, *Bright Epoch: Women & Coeducation in the American West*, skillfully represents this new approach. She notes that she "is not looking for gender discrimination around every campus corner" (12). Rather, she wishes to tell a layered, complete story of early coeducation in the West, including a correct understanding of the relationship between discrimination and progress.

Bright Epoch explores the history of coeducation at four Morrill Act land-grant colleges between 1870 and 1918—Iowa Agricultural College (later Iowa State University), Oregon Agricultural College (Oregon State University), University of Nebraska in Lincoln, and Utah Agricultural

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College (Utah State University). Using student newspapers, literary society publications and minutes, college yearbooks, college catalogues and diaries, and letters of students and administrators, Radke-Moss constructs a complex story of inclusion and exclusion. Female students often experienced physical, ideological, and social segregation, sometimes imposed by administrators and male students, and at other times chosen by the women themselves. But the Western land-grant, coed environment provided a place where gender structures were just fluid enough to allow for female students to frequently challenge these boundaries and find ways to participate on relatively equal terms with male students. “Out of this interplay between separation and inclusion, women students succeeded in negotiating new spaces of gendered inclusion and equality at land-grant colleges” (2). Women students (and their male allies) pushed for and gradually gained opportunities for female participation in science courses, literary societies, campus debates, newspaper editorial staffs, physical education and sports, even military drill groups. Radke-Moss argues that actions like these changed campuses but also shaped the larger society: some women took careers in education, journalism, and science, while other students from these colleges (male and female) went on to act as advocates for women’s rights in various social arenas.

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The author is at her best when contextualizing the growing inclusion of female students; she delves into the stories of women—among them Willa Cather and Carrie Chapman Catt—who, through acts that were sometimes courageous and sometimes serendipitous, chipped away at the barriers keeping women in a subordinate status. To us a woman speaking in front of men, playing basketball, or riding a bike is commonplace, but Radke-Moss effectively shows how these simple acts constituted meaningful change. From the microcosm of the land-grant culture that she wonderfully lays out for the reader, one begins to get a sense of how sweeping changes, such as women’s suffrage, eventually came about through the efforts of individuals.

The author’s focus on campus culture has its downside. A scholar has the prerogative to choose the scope of her own topic, but some readers of *Bright Epoch* will find themselves asking questions that go beyond what happened on campus. What intellectual baggage did students bring with them to school? She suggests that the college environment radicalized many of these students, yet knowing what ideas they came to school with would help us understand how much they changed. In addition, I wondered if the decision by boards of regents and chancellors to institute coeducation implied an imprimatur for reform. In other words, did the students feel emboldened to challenge traditional gender roles because authority approved of a relatively new idea of coeducation? Finally, the breadth of the study could have also been increased by exploring what it

meant that some men supported female reforms. Did the logic of equality win over the male desire to maintain hegemony?

Historians of education will welcome this strong contribution to their field, but *Bright Epoch* also has much to say to us here at BYU–Idaho, for the parallels are intriguing. We too have systems of gender separation—some formal, such as housing rules, and some informal, such as the tendency of female students to be overrepresented in certain majors. Students, faculty, and administration all influence the nature and form of this separation. The task laid upon all of us is to learn from the past by embracing those changes that can improve relations between the sexes, while at the same time maintaining distinctions that adhere to our Heavenly Father’s law and the eternal nature of gender. ☺

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NOTE

Andrea G. Radke-Moss, *Bright Epoch: Women & Coeducation in the American West*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 2, 12 .