

JOYOUS GREETINGS

The First International Women's Movement 1830-1860

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Oxford University Press, 2000

INTRODUCTION

During the 1970s, when I was working on a narrative history of women in Europe, I came across an 1851 letter sent by two jailed French feminists to two groups of their “sisters” abroad, asking for support in organizing women to fight for their own “civil and political equality, and the social right for all.” One copy of the letter went to the Americans who had assembled for the first national women’s rights convention in Massachusetts the year before, the other was directed to the Englishwomen who had just formed the first female political rights association in Britain after petitioning parliament for the suffrage.

I had never heard of either the women who wrote this letter or those who received it, but the document fascinated me. The feminism it expressed seemed amazingly modern. These Frenchwomen demanded not only the right to vote and to hold political office, but also the restructuring of society so that all workers made a satisfactory living, all children got a good education, and all the old, sick, and infirm received decent care. They also voiced the “inexpressible joy” which the “courageous declarations” of the other women had brought them, the sense of solidarity they felt on being “united” with American and English women fighting for the same cause. I wondered how two Frenchwomen in a Parisian prison cell in the middle of the nineteenth century had known where to send these letters. Was there contact between early feminists in different nations and if so, how had it come about and what were its effects?

This book answers these questions. The more I investigated, the more international connections I discovered. This astonished me, because I assumed internationalism to be a twentieth-century development, facilitated by phones and faxes, email and air travel. Instead, I found that these women not only exchanged letters, they also visited each other, read a common body of published writings, shared and transmitted tactics and ideas. These two 1851 letters were not singular occurrences, but rather comprised one exchange in a complicated series of transactions that stretched throughout the Western community, reaching from Worcester, Massachusetts to Leipzig in German Saxony, from Sheffield, England to Paris and other French cities.

Between 1830 and 1860 early feminists relied upon each other’s support, took comfort from each other’s struggles, and helped when those in France and the German states were forced into exile after the 1848 revolutions failed. I discovered that events that historians had previously viewed as phenomena located within individual societies -- from the growth of Saint-Simonian socialism in France to the women’s rights

conventions in the United States, from the British petition for women's vote to the contents of a German feminist newspaper -- really occurred within the matrix of a feminism which transcended national boundaries. Isolated among their compatriots, early feminists reached out to their counterparts in other lands. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, hundreds of people in the United States, Britain, France, and the German states formed an international community dedicated to changing women's status in society. I realized that what I was studying was actually a loose-knit, early, international women's movement, the first such in the world.

Part of what makes this movement seem so modern is its internationalism. But an equal if not larger share of its timeliness comes from the range and content of these feminists' demands. They discussed prostitution and rape, child-raising and divorce, education and jobs. Far from being modest in their expectations, they instead rejected everything their society told them women should be like and created ways of being and doing which still seem progressive. In the middle of the nineteenth century, they not only claimed women's political, social, economic, and moral equality with men, they also attempted to solve problems that continue to trouble us today. They often created names of their own, refusing to use a husband's surname if they married, discarding "Mrs." and "Miss," calling their children after feminist heroines and heroes. They argued that God must be female as well as male, interpreted and rewrote the Bible to transform sections disparaging women, and sometimes ended prayers with "A-woman" instead of "Amen." They taught their sons as well as their daughters to sew and to cook, certain that housework was not a specifically female function.

They reasoned that, given the centuries of female subordination, any remedy which ignored both women's similarities to men and their differences from them could not succeed. So they advocated what I have called a "both/and" strategy, insisting that women needed the benefits of each position until true equality had been achieved. "People often speak of freedom for all, but they are accustomed to mean only men by the word 'all,'" the German feminist Louise Dittmar wrote in 1849, "The state must recognize the woman as woman, supporting her human rights," like the suffrage or freedom of speech, "and also her womanly rights," which included legal protection from marital rape and wife-beating, as well as state support for female higher education and job training to foster women's economic independence. As we watch our courts rule that pregnancy leave discriminates against men, the "both/and" strategy seems increasingly necessary and valuable.

These early feminists did not just seek to transform women's lives, they reached out to workers, to slaves, to Jews, to oppressed groups everywhere, because they saw these causes as one -- an international struggle for human rights. They defied the racial segregation and slavery of their day, they advocated democratic socialism because it promised to end both poverty and privilege, they sought a common ground where the religious and non-believers could stand. Although most of them came from the middle class, they often argued that this privilege enabled them to speak on behalf of their poorer sisters, who had no hope of engaging public attention. They also were fully aware of the fragility of class lines in this volatile era of boom and bust -- how easily families could fall into poverty if the male breadwinner died. Challenging the limits on

their own situation, their approach was inclusive -- all would be free or none could be.

It is the extent of this radical feminism which makes them seem so up-to-date. While women can now vote and run for office, much of feminism remains an unfinished project. What connects feminists today to those who lived a hundred and fifty years ago is the fundamental belief that the entire system of female subordination and inferiority preached from pulpits and taught in schools, given force in law codes and in the lower wages women earn, has been constructed by men in their own interest. The only reason "why each woman should be a mere appendage of a man" is "that men like it," as Harriet Taylor Mill wrote in 1851. Rejecting age-old teachings that male dominance is natural, God-given, and universal, feminists believe that it can and must be ended, for the benefit of all, men and women alike. This conviction is the heart of feminism, now as well as then.

Historians debate whether it is appropriate to use a word like feminism before it actually existed in the language. "Feminism" comes into use only in the late nineteenth century, but no other term adequately describes the wide range of these people's convictions and beliefs. In addition to naming them feminists, I have also called them radicals, since they sought to address root causes of social problems -- the origin of that word -- as well as "departing considerably from the usual or traditional," one of its common meanings.

Working for goals most of their contemporaries considered impossible and wrong-headed, these mid-nineteenth-century feminists were dismissed in their own day and later as crack-pots and utopians. Their story has never been noticed, much less told. Historians who wrote about international movements usually ignored or diminished women's contributions; historians who wrote about women almost always did so within the context of a single nation. The result has been separate histories of various national women's movements, but no account until now which sees the entire work of these pioneers from an international perspective.

Who belonged to this movement? I began by charting their international connections -- the travels, correspondence networks, and literature which linked them. I looked at important feminist actions which received transatlantic publicity, from a Frenchwoman running for the legislature to the American women's rights conventions. I studied the movements where these women had first questioned the female role: anti-slavery, early socialism, the German free religion movement. I then eliminated the "loners" -- women like George Sand, Flora Tristan, and Margaret Fuller -- who voiced feminist ideas and had important influence on other feminists, but who had not joined with other women in organized movements. A core group of twenty women emerged from the original larger set of about fifty activists.

This cohort of international feminists, their actions and ideas, constitute the subject of this book. Most of these women are unknown today, so to make it easier to follow their story, the chart on page supplies the basic facts about their lives. One reason they are so unfamiliar is the persistent scarcity of historical work done on women. There are no biographies for most of them. While men of equal importance have been the subject of a great deal of scholarship, especially in American history, women remain neglected. For instance, the speeches and writings of Lucretia Mott, a key figure in anti-slavery, pacifism, and free religion as well

as women's rights, remain inaccessible. Her talks and sermons were printed in 1980 in typescript by a small press; her letters were published only in a severely edited 1884 publication produced by her grand-daughter. The chief sources for her life are in the manuscript collections of specialized libraries not open to the general public.

But Mott is easier to work on than most of the other women in this study, since her papers have at least been gathered in archives. Most of these women were neither so well-known nor so fortunate, and key documents about their lives have been irretrievably lost. The historian Adrien Ranvier possessed a collection of the French feminist Jeanne Deroin's letters and writings when he studied her in 1907 -- all have since disappeared. Louise Otto, the most important feminist in German history, did not obtain an archive until the University of Leipzig established one in the 1990s. By then, no copy of her 1849 poetry anthology about German emigration to America, *Westward* could be found. The lives of the less famous in this group -- Louise Dittmar, Jenny d'Héricourt, Anne Knight, Ernestine Rose, and others -- have been painstakingly pieced together by scholars working with nineteenth-century newspapers, pamphlets, and government documents. I could not have done my work without their labor and I gratefully cite their writings in my footnotes and bibliography.

It has been a tremendous pleasure to help restore these figures to the historical record. While the disappearance of women's past contributions is depressing, the retrieval of their legacy is inspiring and energizing. Throughout the labor required by both this book and the continuing struggles for feminist principles today, I have taken heart from Lucretia Mott's words to the 1853 Women's Rights Convention: "Any great change must expect opposition, because it shakes the very foundation of privilege." I hope these pages you are about to read further that great and necessary change.