

THE BOOKMAN



August, 1921

AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE
INTELLECTUAL LIFE

Mary Austin

AN OUTLINE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

A Parody of H. G. Wells by Donald Ogden Stewart

NEWS NOTES OF PORTAGE, WISCONSIN: I

A Poem by Zona Gale

GELETT BURGESS AS A HUMORIST

Gelett Burgess

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: I

From the Novel by Stephen Vincent Benet

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

Louis Untermeyer

George Sterling

Christopher Morley

Thomas Moulton

Alexander Woolcott

Kenneth Andrews

Paul Elmer More

Amy Lowell

Heywood Brown

George O'Neil

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James C. Gray

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Contents

American Women and the Intellectual Life	Mary Austin	481
News Notes of Portage, Wisconsin. <i>A Poem</i>		
I: Violin	Zona Gale	486
Gelett Burgess As a Humorist	Gelett Burgess	488
<i>With Sketches by the Author.</i>		
Heedless the Birds... <i>A Poem</i>	Thomas Moulton	497
The Beginning of Wisdom: I	Stephen Vincent Benét	498
The Bather. <i>A Poem</i>	George O'Neil	504
An Outline of American History		
III: The Courtship of Miles Standish, In the Man- ner of F. Scott Fitzgerald	Donald Ogden Stewart	505
<i>With Sketches by Herb Roth.</i>		
Invincible. <i>A Poem</i>	Alter Brody	510
Eugene O'Neill	Pierre Loving	511
<i>With a Sketch by Ivan Opffer.</i>		
Careless. <i>A Poem</i>	George Sterling	520
Mr. Dempsey's Five-Foot Shelf	Heywood Brown	521
The Passionate Sword. <i>A Poem</i>	Jean Starr Untermeyer	524
Literary Portraits: Five—Vachel Lindsay	Christopher Morley	525
Broadway, Our Literary Signpost	Kenneth Andrews	526
<i>With Sketches by the Author.</i>		
The Poems of the Month	Amy Lowell	531
The Londoner	Simon Pure	534
Harbor Talk. <i>A Poem</i>	David Morton	540
The Editor Recommends—	J. F.	541
A Shelf of Recent Books		
Youth Recaptured	Helen Thomas Follett	543
The Portrait of a Queen	James C. Grey	544
Pitiful Puppets	Louis Untermeyer	547
Life Is Too Short	Alexander Woollcott	550
<i>With a Sketch by Horace Brodsky.</i>		
A Witness for the Puritans	Paul Elmer More	552
Mr. Taft on Modern Sculpture	John Gregory	553
Outdoor Books in Brief Review		554
The Bookman's Monthly Score		559
Foreign Notes and Comment		
What Makes a Translation?	Allen Wilson Porterfield	561
Books and Writers in New Germany	Ethel Talbot Scheffauer	563
The Gossip Shop		566
<i>With Sketches by William Saphier and Kenneth Andrews.</i>		



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AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE

By Mary Austin

IN writing of the intellectual life among American women, one has in mind, of course, something more inclusive than the life which is led by women who are called Intellectuals. Whatever that term has come to mean abroad, in the United States it stands for a small group of determinedly young and preponderately male persons, for the most part engaged in retrieving from the sum of human knowledge such facts as tend to show that we would all be much better off if society were quite other than it is. In the current periodicals where our American Intellectuals are actively in evidence, it is noticeable that there are few women's names, and none that stand out as convincingly, femininely original. So that if it were not for the two or three women novelists the quality of whose work is abundantly attested both at home and abroad, we might easily fall into the mistake that European observers are continually making about us, and conclude that

the coruscation of a preternatural surface aptitude is all there is of intellectuation among American women. That this is not the case any well-informed American would be quick to affirm, yet so completely is our intellectual life masked by the social process, that the protestant would be hard pushed to find instances to back up his affirmation.

Thirty years ago the question whether a particular young woman dedicated herself to the intellectual life or not, depended on the likelihood of her expensive preparation for it being, as our mothers phrased it, "thrown away on some man". In those days, before the problem of marriage or a career had been superseded by the perplexities of marriage and a career, freedom of decision for a particular young woman was a polite fiction, and brainy girls were distinguished from others by hair brushed straight back from the forehead and by the wearing of sensible shoes.

That conventions of women collegians are no longer composed exclusively of women whose shirtwaists stick out as much in the back as the front, must be charged to that development of democracy which makes your means of justifying your existence in society identical with your method of maintaining yourself in it. What women have learned through the correlation of honors and incomes, is that high place is not so much a question of sex as it is of personality. So long as intellectual life for women was thought of as divorced from the rich personal endowment which has characterized the leaders of men's thinking—men like Emerson and William James—it had to be lived outside the hope of any such distinction as fell, as a matter of course, to such men. Among American women at least, our much derided commercialism will always be credited with having taught the gifted woman that her chance of preferment depends very largely upon her being indistinguishable in effect from the rest of womankind.

One does not mean to say that sex distinction in the intellectual field has wholly disappeared behind the crisp toilets and expensive grooming of successful women. But the extent to which women in America have mobilized their personal endowment as the background of achievement, is the first item that must be taken into account in any social estimate, and the item which leads to the most frequent mistake that is made about us.

During the late invasion of Englishmen of letters, one of them took occasion to remark in the course of an after-dinner speech that, of course, if he had had a "literary audience", he might have gone into his subject with an appropriate thoroughness. Later when it was made plain to him that

most of the guests were women of achievement—in several cases of achievement superior to his own—he offered as his sole defense the tradition of frumpishness such as still attaches to the British Intellectual. It is quite possible that the tradition is libelous, but it is still the small change of comparison everywhere except in the United States.

But if intellectual women are no longer expected to resemble a class apart, there are still those who insist that in the matter of formal and institutionalized honors, they be treated as such. It is practically impossible for a woman who elects teaching as a profession to become president of a coeducational university, and almost as unlikely that she become the head of a department. No woman has attained to the highest places in our great foundations for scientific research. No women's names occur in connection with the administration of such institutions, though women have been notably successful in the administration of women's organizations. Some years ago, a search to discover why so few American women had distinguished themselves in science, revealed the fact that much of the work on which great names for men were founded was done by women assistants. There was a quite universal conviction among these women that place and opportunity for record-making personal investigation would not be accorded a woman.

As a feminist not wholly given over to the conviction of the innate superiority of women, I suspect that in institutional work, particularly when carried on under the direction of an eminent man, the individual equation counts for more than it should. The struggle among men for place and opportunity is very bitter. Women

might too easily ascribe to sex prejudice what is largely professional jealousy. I am persuaded, too, that intellectual women frequently fail to take into account the effect of the tradition of sex subordination working from within. Always in the interest of a distinguished man, one finds them giving too much even while protesting that so much is taken.

In the arts (for any art followed sincerely must be reckoned among intellectual pursuits), or in any field in which woman works from her own initiative by direct appeal to the general public, she is quite as sure as man of public recognition; quite as sure, when the quality of her work exceeds the public capacity, of an equal measure of neglect. Mrs. Fiske, Margaret Anglin, Mary Shaw, Ruth St. Denis, and Isadora Duncan are illustrations in point. Jane Addams, though her popularity has been dimmed by the cloudy emotionalism of the war period, can never have claimed that it was for a moment obscured by sex prejudice. There is not the slightest disposition to withhold from Alice Fletcher the place to which she is entitled in ethnological research, and among creative writers no name glitters with so clear a light of intellectual illumination as Edith Wharton's.

II

Happily though we may conclude that in America, when a woman goes into intellectual life as a man goes—backing up a special gift with the whole of her personal endowment—she may expect the same return in money and honor that a man expects, we cannot overlook the fact that a comparatively small number of women find their complete expression in specialization. At once more personal and more social than men, great num-

bers of American women are living lives of acute and highly energized intellectuation in fields of which there is as yet no formal or institutionalized recognition. Women themselves are only just beginning to understand the unprecedented movement of the twentieth century to admit that matters which have been immemorably thought of as women's concern—food, housing, hygiene, eugenics, marriage, the whole paraphernalia of personal living—can be the object of scholarly research and the point of application for scientific truth.

Right here is the point of departure for much in our western culture that is inexplicable to the European understanding. It throws a backward light on the failure of women in the past to register high achievement in impersonal fields like mathematics and philosophy. Not incapacity but indifference has ruled the woman's choice, and the scorn of the male for feminine intellect is more than balanced by the superciliousness of the average woman's secret attitude toward the mental process of mere man and the objects of his intellectual solicitude. Nine-tenths of the preoccupations of learning up to the middle of the nineteenth century are pure bosh. There is no inferiority, but a measure of superior feminine discernment in woman's refusal to occupy herself with the irrelevance of the number of angels that could dance on the point of a needle, or the fallacy of the undistributed middle.

With the development of modern science which makes it possible to take an intellectual interest in the business of living, there has sprung up in the United States an acuteness and intensity of intellectual life that is more or less obscured from the public consciousness by its determinedly femi-

nine method. Always less given to ritual than men are, there is in this new life among women an almost contemptuous avoidance of the Pooh-Bah traditions of learning. This is particularly noticeable when it becomes necessary for the intellectual leaders of women to express themselves through the usual channels of current publication. Any number of women are writing and lecturing on topics which may become the "cause" of wars and the subjects of diplomacy, whose work remains practically unknown except among other women. But when stripped to its essentials, such work is found to differ from the writing of men who have attained international recognition, chiefly in the matter of literary form. There is great indifference to style among women thinkers, and complete inhibition of the Pooh-Bah tradition as expressed in the patter of professional scholarship.

An editorial on disarmament written by Herbert Croly would have a style appreciably superior to an editorial on the same subject by Ida Clyde Clarke. Any difference in first-hand knowledge of facts, observed political trends, the quality of social prophecy, would as likely as not be in Mrs. Clarke's favor. And there would be an enormous difference in the immediacy of contact with the audience, for Mrs. Clarke has a reading public of between two and three million, with a large personal following, while Mr. Croly must be content with the much smaller number who still like their political inspiration served with the grand gesture. Yet so little is the public consciousness aroused to this situation, so much is it under the sway of traditionalism, that while it is not necessary to refer Mr. Croly's name to "The New Republic", it remains for most people an item of unassimilated

information that Ida Clyde Clarke is the leading editorial writer of "Pictorial Review".

Probably the incompletely realized sense of form which has kept women so far from the highest achievement in music and sculpture, is at the bottom of this distinction. It is also involved with her scorn of the impersonal and indirect, her deep sense of social applicability as the test of value. Finally it is concerned with the feminine need of response, woman's habit of shortcircuiting all her process in view of her experience as the centre of the family group. The question of how far it is expedient to invest matters of immediate appeal, however scholarly their implication, with the style which insures a measure of permanence, is one we have never fairly faced. The advocates of formalized and stylistic writings are as superior to any other consideration as the practitioners of "popular appeal" are scornful. On the general count of getting themselves recognized as the intellectual equals of men, women have lost by their neglect of form. This is notably the case with one of the most original of women thinkers, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Mrs. Gilman is not without style, but it is the style of Mrs. Gilman's mind, thin, vivid, and swift as a lightning streak, rather than the carefully finished instrument of communication. Only in her most ambitious and perhaps most deeply felt works, like "Women and Economics", does it produce organic literary form. Undoubtedly this has led to misappreciation and the neglect of Mrs. Gilman's contribution long before we have ceased to need it.

The indifference of women to traditional methods of expression has had much to do with preventing the expression of their especial point of view

in magazines edited by men along traditional lines. It has led to the formation of a medium for intellectual exchange unparalleled in history. By means of the federated and affiliated women's organizations ten million women are being continuously and immediately brought into contact with whatever is being thought by anybody who can secure any sort of certification of worthwhileness. No doubt the ten million suffer from our common American incapacity for distinguishing between the informed and the uninformed opinion. There is no other reason for assuming that the intellectualization which goes on among them is any less sound or perceptive than that which takes place among the smaller, more ritualistic groups of men thinkers. But just because it goes on in the common, unheretic speech, our so-called Intellectuals remain practically unaware of it.

The result is that our young men thinkers seem to themselves the sole apostles of American culture; and that they do not find themselves happy in their isolation, one has only to read any half-dozen of their latest books to discover. One can imagine that the future, looking back on our time, will see this schism between young men and mature women as the greatest singularity of our bisexual organization. At present it is perhaps the greatest single obstacle to intellectual effectiveness in America. Androcentric as the culture of Europe has ever been, it is always tempered and mellowed by the wisdom of mature women. But here the ancient tribal usage which holds that older men should rule while young men adventure, mature women

mediate between them and young women be husbanded, has given place to a system of isolated groups which have almost the force of caste. There is even in the American mind a slight suspicion of impropriety in the idea of free association between young men and older women. Certainly there is a marked indisposition on the part of the women leaders of women's thinking to pay the price of form which would make them completely intelligible to the young, to our general social loss. In no country in the world is social life being approached on so intellectual a plane, and nowhere could the same degree of intellectualization come to so little purpose.

As life and learning, following the trend of modern science, have more and more to do with one another, there will doubtless be increasing authentication of our woman culture which must make itself felt in the institutional world. But before the perfect adjustment can take place there will probably occur a period of sharp antagonism, such as preceded the granting of woman suffrage. Probably it is inevitable that social growth should take place by successions of such crises. I see nothing to regret in such a possibility in America. There has never been a genuine woman culture, based upon generic differences in the woman approach, and the experiment might well be worth undergoing. It might, indeed, have distinct service to perform in the abolition of the Pooh-Bah tradition of learning among men, and the rise among women of new and necessary appreciations of intellectual form.