

Women's rights—the revolution that failed

EVERYONE WAS BRAVE: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America. By William L. O'Neill. Quadrangle Books, 266 pp. \$7.95.

By Bernard A. Weisberger

Half a century has now passed since women were constitutionally guaranteed the vote. It is astonishing that the consequences are not what one educated feminist predicted in 1840: "The honest earnings of de-pendants will be paid; popular demagogues espouse important unprincipled; true genius sincerely encouraged; and above all, parental integrity restored." Not only is society stubbornly unresponsive, but, as William O'Neill points out in this provocative book, women themselves have lost much ground in fifty years. Among other depressing statistics are those which show that in 1920 (one Ph.D. is seven sent to a woman but only one in ten in 1956; the proportion of women among college students has not yet regained its 1920 peak of 47.3 per cent; the percentage of desirable professional, technical and skilled jobs held by women has declined since 1945; and on a broad underlining comment, the income of working women in 1963 was only 59 per cent of average male income.

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The "women's revolution" has gone backward, says O'Neill, thereby adopting the viewpoint of Henry Frick, whom he describes as a "paul agitator," awesomely convinced by that vocation to a "staid tone" and "conspicuous vision." What he has done is to essay an historian's explanation of how it all happened.

Now a feminism led in 1840 by determined women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had surrendered in 1940 to a neo-Victorian feminine mystique which insisted that women's true fulfillment was in procreation, and led a generation of girls into "an orgy of domesticity."

It is ironic, however, that he chose his title from a statement made by Newton D. Baker in 1932: at a memorial service for Florence Kelley: "Everyone was brave from the moment she came into the room." For Florence Kelley, a woman who devoted her lifetime to unionism, the protection of labor and the cause of the poor, was what O'Neill calls a "social feminist," and it is O'Neill's argument that social feminism did the revolution in its splendor since that women who rose to the top of the women's rights movement around the turn of the century, the founding mothers of such organizations as the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and other associations, some of which are now defunct. O'Neill asserts that they

disdained the "radical feminism" of early leaders like Elizabeth Stanton and Charlotte P. Gilman, who perceived that the domestic system itself was women's prison, seeing as it did on the Victorian notion that women's function was to keep the men and who men out of his "natural" sphere in share with her the task of offspring." The benevolent social feminism left the notion of women's "special role" unchallenged, and tried to bring their supposedly higher ethical standards to bear in the larger family that was society through their educational, social and lobbying efforts. They "sacrificed full emancipation to the social reforms that public-spirited, middle-class women thought most important."

As O'Neill unfolds the tale, only the fight for the ballot held various segments of the feminist world together. Once it was won, the bonds were dissolved. The flapper of the Twenties judged that it was more important to get herself as an individual out of corners and isolation than to bring Men's "solidarity" to a sinful world. Thus came the Depression, the war, the baby boom and the twenties, led by prohibitionist leaders on Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and the ubiquitous advertisers who turned Mommy, even with college diplomas in hand, kept in kitchens and playrooms, where she could buy, and buy, and buy.

O'Neill relates all this intriguingly. (Continued on page 3.)



Parade of colored people in a friendly neighborhood meeting in New York, 1912

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(Continued from page 1) single but with considerable indeterminacies. The only real indeterminacy, he believes, was a transformed general model on the faculty itself, or socialism, which "alone promised to change the American social order enough so that women could exercise in practice those rights they were increasingly awarded in principle." He means that socialism alone provides for public nurseries, maternity care and other benefits which reduce dependency on a bread-winning male. Time and again he suggests that life is harder for women in countries like those run by "the democratic intelligents of northern Europe" than for the young American woman in her father and/or husband's home. But he takes a good deal on faith, for he seems not to have registered the reactions of women in those feminist Utopias to their new condition. A customary salute to "socialist Russia," where women "occupy a large part of the professions and hold high public offices," mentions no figures, no list of offices, and no analysis of women's actual power in the bureaucratic and technical elite. There is no side glance at the position of women in the new, non-European nations or any attempt to assess the weight of pre-socialist social and cultural tradition in promoting or hindering feminist phenomena.

O'Neill, who believes that socialism should "do for the sexual struggle what Marx did for the class struggle," slips into the Marxist habit of explaining all social behavior as a function of the overall economic order.

Like all sympathizers with feminism, too, he sometimes confuses general social problems with those specifically feminine. The advertisers who peddle detergents and instant foods to the ladies are no more temptations of their customers than those who peddle men instant sexual conquests through the purchase of particular automobiles or after-shave lotions. The educated woman who has given up a career has a counterpart in the sensitive male who may have sacrificed to prepare for vocation in order that he may provide his children with television, automobiles, psychotherapy and allegedly higher education. We are obviously in the midst of a revolution in sexual roles and behavior in which men and women alike do some painful thinking. I trust on adding, however, as a male reviewer, that I do not deny that women are still getting the worst of it.

Finally, though O'Neill has nicely resisted the temptation to be rude and superior that overcomes so many men who write about feminism, he sometimes yields to another, which afflicts many historians currently writ-

ting: the progressive voluntarism of the 1900 to 1920 era; that is, the tendency to personify. The first of commentators runs thus: These early liberals were wrong, bold, intelligent, yet somehow failed to see with our perspicacious the resistance of the American "system," and since we cannot be wrong, they must have been singularly naive. Thus we learn from O'Neill that when "highly intelligent women like Jane Addams rejected socialism on moral grounds, and politically sophisticated ones like Florence Kelley abandoned it in all but name, for practical reasons," it was scarcely to be expected that "the great mass of women" would do otherwise. Or that "even so gifted a woman as Charlotte Perkins Gilman was unable to fully grasp the socialist imperative." An attitude like this simply sidesteps the reformers' moral arguments, and seems to say that since their hopes didn't work out, their values are hardly worth discussion. This shiny brightness has come close to wrecking both pragmatic and socialist liberalism in America, and is the last thing we need.

Nevertheless, O'Neill has written a study which is challenging, though not radically exciting. He deserves commendation for providing us with one possible historical perspective on a revolution whose failure has seemed so all.