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NEWSLETTER

New Scholarship Illuminating Feminism Before Feminism by Carol Sicherman

A panoramic examination of “feminism” in our time shows the interconnections of historians’ work and activism, connecting “#metoo” with new questions about old events. With a sweeping view of Europe and North America reaching back to prehistory, Miriam Schneir’s *Before Feminism: The History of an Idea Without a Name* (Mews Books, 2021) assays to reinscribe in our historical knowledge the presence of women in positions of power and influence from which traditional history has excluded them. Even more important, it brings to light the tough lives and resistance of women entirely without power, some of whom stubbornly nonetheless retained “pagan” beliefs in the face of official repression. Schneir’s dry wit enlivens the narrative: if Puritan preachers advocated humility, “in early New England . . . humility was a less useful female trait than capability” (p. 178).

In a gentle and fluent style, aided by well-chosen illustrations, Schneir explores not only documents of a more traditional sort but such sources as court cases and enraged clerics’ accusations. When people can’t speak for themselves, the complaints of those who control the oppressed may reveal the ideas and feelings of those whom they scorn. After a prologue on the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, the book begins with Knossos in the Bronze Age, when the main deities of the Minoans were goddesses, and women led religious ceremonies; as in much of this book, Schneir reports recent evidence, in this case a 2015 archaeological discovery. The next chapters explore further the ancient Greek world as well as the seemingly macho ancient civilization of the Celts, spread out over a vast geographical expanse, which nonetheless placed a high value on women.

Chapters devoted to Roman, early Christian, and Medieval European cultures explore how women managed to “seize the moment” within male-dominated societies, even in such unlikely contexts as Muslim Spain. Schneir demolishes shibboleths. St. Paul indeed insisted that “woman was made for man,” yet mistranslations have concealed the substantial contributions of women to early Christianity. Schneir’s argument that early Christianity liberated some women from traditional constraints of gender, particularly as dissident sects arose, leads to a fascinating discussion of the Cathars (Albigensians), women and men whose belief in gender equality shocked the established Church into exterminating them. Schneir delves as well into northern cultures, learned women of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and women’s place in changing cities. It is through Dutch women of the seventeenth century that we come to New Netherlands and thence to New England, the American and French Revolutions, free and enslaved Blacks, and nineteenth-century movements toward equality.

Even in the more familiar eras, Schneir uncovers a wealth of tiny details unknown to all but specialists. Women’s labor, we learn, was essential in conducting the boycott of British goods that preceded the American Revolution: by spinning their own cloth, women eliminated the need for imported fabric. When gains for women were in the ascendant during the French Revolution, a backlash resulted in such effective repression that French women could not vote until after World War II. Yet, Schneir tells us, it was two absurdly young French women who founded, in 1832, the world’s first journal devoted to female emancipation.

One theme implicit in the book is the durability of misogynistic assumptions among historians. Schneir’s achievement rests on quite recent scholarship. Historians assumed, for example, that medieval scribes were men. Only in 1992 did a (woman) scholar show through painstaking analysis of primary documents

– *continued on the back page*

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Solomon Schocken: Sonoma's Preeminent Jewish Entrepreneur

Peter's presentation in July, which he kindly summarized, touched on several themes of interest to historians. One was serendipity: in the early days of the pandemic lock-down when Peter felt at loose ends, an extraordinary package of documents came into his possession – an historian's dream, and a bit miraculous as well. Another theme was the value of biography to reveal much more than just a life story. In the early history of American Sonoma we saw glimpses of the eclipsed former General Mariano Vallejo (Solomon Schocken helped him financially) and the transformation of Californio landmarks into small-town improvements. The barracks for Mexican Army troops morphed into a general store and home concealed behind a Victorian gingerbread façade, and the Mission church became a Schocken warehouse. (The latter also occurred at Fort Ross during the "American period" when the Russian chapel at various times housed animals and farm implements.) Decades later when historians and archaeologists decided to "interpret" these Californio historic structures in their original form, all these changes were removed and the only evidence of their existence is in photo-graphs. The presentation also underscored the importance of immigrants to the development of California. Northern Italians supplied the labor in Schocken's quarry enterprise and went on to develop new businesses in the area, some quite significant. (Ed.)

On July 18 **Peter G. Meyerhof** gave a Zoom presentation to the Institute on his recent research on Solomon Schocken. By combining a wealth of newly acquired and unpublished research notes made 40 years ago by a former Sonoman with photos and documents from the collections of the Sonoma Valley Historical Society, an interesting story emerged.

Solomon Schocken was born in the Prussian province of Posen in 1842. He immigrated to the United States in 1862. Solomon and his wife Dora were the first recorded Jewish individuals to settle in Sonoma, in 1873. He immediately engaged in the retail trade of everything from groceries to clothes, kerosene, grain, lumber, and wine. His success with low profit margins resulted from shrewd purchases, high sales, and constant replenishment with new products. Early in his career, Schocken encountered retaliation from other merchants who had charges brought against him because his store was open on Sundays. He was fined but soon made successful efforts to integrate into the business community by becoming a member of the local Masonic lodge.

He began purchasing properties that would allow him to expand his retail business. In 1878, he purchased the former Sonoma Barracks building from General Vallejo and had it extensively remodeled into a retail store with an ornate Victorian gingerbread façade as well as a residence for himself and his wife. The central location allowed him to take advantage of the newly constructed Sonoma Valley Railroad which had its depot practically across the street in the Sonoma Plaza. Excursion trains brought many customers from San Francisco.

In 1880 Schocken purchased the former Sonoma Mission buildings from Archbishop Alemany. The church was turned into a warehouse while the former priest's quarters were rented out to a vintner. During this period, Schocken began making personal loans to General Vallejo who had fallen on difficult times. Schocken also financed the immigration of several nephews from Europe and taught them the mercantile business which helped them become established in various locations throughout California.

In 1883 Schocken was elected a city trustee in spite of some anti-Semitic editorials in the local newspaper. Schocken proposed a city hall be

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located in the Plaza and took an active role in the beautification of the surrounding area. He also leased out land for a saloon and bowling alley adjacent to his store.

In 1885 Schocken engaged in a new business venture—the quarrying of basalt blocks for the paving of streets. With the advent of the cable car system in San Francisco, there was a great demand for flat-surfaced rectangular blocks to replace the variably-sized and rounded cobblestones which were far less stable. The hills north of Sonoma happened to contain some of the best deposits of basalt. Schocken purchased a 62-acre parcel on what became known as Schocken Hill less than a mile northeast of his store and opened a large quarry. By 1889 he was providing 90 percent of all the blocks used in San Francisco. He hired a large workforce of quarrymen, stone carvers, and teamsters who were mostly recent immigrants from northern Italy and had experience working in the marble quarries of Tuscany. He supplied them with all the tools, the horses, and the wagons to quarry the stone and bring it to the Plaza where flatcars would transport it to ferries on San Francisco Bay.

Schocken now developed plans to build a resort with a public swimming pool, but delayed his plans because of domestic problems. He divorced his wife, Dora, on the grounds of her desertion and longtime abandonment of him; she had stated “she would rather die than live in Sonoma.” Four years later he married Clara Handel who was living in San Francisco. This marriage again brought little comfort to him and he would declare later that “she was my wife in name only.”

In the late 1880s, Schocken discovered a very productive artesian well behind his store. It soon became one of the principal water sources for the city of Sonoma. Schocken began a successful business digging wells for ranches and resorts throughout the Sonoma Valley.

His next plan was to build electric railway lines for passengers and freight through Sonoma and north to Santa Rosa with another line west to the mouth of the Russian River. Although he was awarded all the necessary franchises, he abandoned the project because the 1906 earthquake prevented him from getting the necessary capital.

Realizing the value of transitioning from the production of basalt paving blocks to the fine aggregate which was required to make smooth roads suitable for automobile traffic, he planned to buy a rock crusher for use on the 25 years worth of tailings at his quarry. However in 1909 another quarry near the shoreline of the Bay acquired such a rock crusher. Realizing he could not compete financially, he sold his quarry at a substantial profit and gradually retired from all active business enterprises.

When Solomon Schocken passed away in 1932 at the age of 89 in his San Francisco home, he was praised by all who knew him as brilliant, kind, and “the fairest merchant Sonoma ever had.” His nephews and former Italian employees including Samuele Sebastiani, Agostino Pinelli, and Celso Viviani, acknowledged the value of the mentoring they had received from Schocken. These men and their families succeeded well into the mid-20th century with enterprises including wine making, creameries, quarrying, canneries, cheese making, and real estate.

– *Peter G. Meyerhof*

George T. Strong, the Civil War Sanitary Commission, and the Women’s Movement

On August 15, **Christopher Webber** shared with us the story of George Templeton Strong, a Wall Street lawyer and son of a wealthy and prominent family in New York City. Born in 1820, he attended Columbia College—the forerunner of Columbia University—graduating

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in 1838. He began to keep a diary in 1837 and added to it until the end of his life in 1875. In four bound volumes, it contains over four million words, written with a quill pen. It offers a picture of the man himself and, more importantly, a window on five decades of American history.

True to his surname, Strong held strong positions on people and events, and he was no respecter of greatness. William Tecumseh Sherman, commanding general of the Union Army, struck him as “a stumpy, quadrangular little man . . . with hair so short that it looks like a coat of black paint.” A prominent Episcopal bishop from Vermont may have been “smart,” but he had “a latent crack somewhere in his cranium.” Abraham Lincoln as “the best president we’ve had since Jackson’s time” but essentially a backwoodsman, whose “evident integrity and simplicity of purpose would compensate for worse grammar than his, and for even more intense provincialism and rusticity.” Aware that comments such as these would not be well-received, and perhaps subject to libel, Strong made family members pledge to preserve the diary after his death and not make it public for fifty years. Historians are fortunate that the volumes were preserved and found a good home in the New-York Historical Society. (More about this later.)

The diary reveals Strong’s growing opposition to slavery, his compassion for the poor and underprivileged, and his anger at their oppressors. In 1860, the collapse of a shoddily-built textile mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts caused the deaths of several hundred workers, chiefly women and young girls. It is still regarded as one of the worst industrial accidents in American history. “Somebody had murdered about 200 people,” was Strong’s comment, “but society has no avenging gibbet for the respectable millionaire and homicide.” In the summer of 1863, after Congress instituted the military draft, New York

City was rocked by three days of violent protest. The infamous “Manhattan Draft Riots” were the nation’s first race riot. Poor Blacks, whom Strong regarded as “the most peaceful, sober, and inoffensive of our poor,” were the principal victims of outraged working-class whites. “A nice town to call itself the center of civilization,” he wrote bitterly. “How this infernal slavery system has corrupted our blood, North as well as South.”

At the age of 41, with poor eyesight, Strong was not a candidate for combat, but there were other ways to support the war effort. He donated money to equip a regiment (1,000 enlisted men and officers) and exercised his right to pay a young man to serve in his stead. But Chris is particularly interested in Strong’s work with the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC). A non-governmental agency inspired by the work of Florence Nightingale and the creation of a British sanitary commission during the Crimean War, the USSC was authorized to raise money to improve health and medical services for the Union Army, in which more than two million men would eventually serve. Sanitation and the spread of communicable diseases were significant problems from the outset, especially when men from remote rural areas were suddenly thrust into crowded barracks. Troops arrived in Washington in dirty, crowded cattle cars, without food or drink, and in the camps they were given unpalatable rations and nothing but bundles of rotten straw to sleep on.

The Sanitary Commission was founded in June 1861. Strong served from the very beginning and soon became treasurer of the three-man standing committee responsible for overseeing its work. His focus was on fundraising for badly-needed supplies, but diary entries indicate that he also observed and reported on conditions at some military sites. But doctors were ignorant of the need for sanitation, and devastating shortages continued.

One hospital that Strong visited had over a hundred patients and only two women to care for them. By February 1862 he and fellow committee members became disheartened by lack of government support and public reporting. They considered resigning. “We have been shielding the Medical Bureau all this time from the hurricane of public wrath.” Conditions did improve gradually. The USSC received commendations for its work, but Strong’s diary—as we might expect—sometimes told uncomfortable truths. In one case, an army surgeon who was asked whether the Sanitary Commission should send more supplies to deal with 2,000 typhoid cases, responded: “You needn’t send any more from your stores. The men die as a general rule anyhow.” Strong regarded the fact that the government allowed such a man to remain in its service even for one hour as “a national crime.”

A few words about the diary, its history, and its importance. Eventually it came to public attention and various editions were published. None of them are complete. Chris quoted the editors of the volume that is in the UC Berkeley Library: “We have excluded comments on the weather...pointless episodes...mentions of unidentifiable or uninteresting people...prosy theological disquisitions,” and “dealt sternly with lectures, sermons, and vestry sessions” as well as “routine legal business.” These are not words that true historians wish to hear. But they can take heart: the New-York Historical Society digitized all four volumes and made it possible for scholars to see the real document, doodles and all! You may not wish to read all four million words, but you will have a true flavor of the man. (See: <https://digitalcollections.nyhistory.org/islandora/object/nyhs%3Astrong.>)

Because of the length of this summary, a later issue of the newsletter will focus on what Chris said about the work of women as doctors, nurses, and hospital workers during the war, and

about the implications of those experiences for the next generation of women. Again, quite fascinating!
– *Joanne Lafler*

Writers Group Report

We continue to Zoom on. In July we discussed a chapter from Cathy Robbins’ book *A Torrid Splendor: Finding Calabria*. This section of her work focused on her family’s home village of Sant’ Andrea and the experience of emigration and return. She gives special emphasis to the experience of her own family, but also tries to view it through a wider lens. In August we considered Pam Peirce’s work on Katharine Gibson. Pam is wrestling with the problem of how to approach this fascinating woman who, under the pseudonym of Jane Hillyer, wrote an important account of her experience of mental illness, incarceration, and recovery. The discussion of Cathy’s and Pam’s works focused on the problem of structure both authors are struggling with, and the group considered various ways they might move ahead. Cathy has decided to take a step back from her writing to rethink how she wants to proceed. Pam is doing much the same.

In September we examined a chapter of Dan Kohanski’s book *After God*. This section is entitled “It’s All About Getting Into Heaven,” and deals with Christian and Jewish conceptions of life after death. Like all of Dan’s work so far, this chapter was well written and clear. The group agreed that Dan has successfully moved away from the more scholarly approach he took when he began this project and has adopted a more popular tone suited to the general audience he is hoping to reach. Dan’s work is nearly complete and he is seeking possible publishers. As always, the Writers Group is eager to enlist new members. If you are writing something and think that you could benefit from sensitive and supportive discussions of your project, join us!

– *Rob Robbins*

MEMBER NEWS

In Memoriam

We learned on August 18 that long-time member **Richard Raack** died at the age of 91. A chance question to Institute member Bogna Lorence Kot finally led us to this news. Louis Trager writes of our long search for Professor Raack when he no longer responded to our inquiries:

In my self-appointed capacity as the Institute's collector of dues arrearages, in 2021 I found our member Richard Raack on the unpaid list for the second straight year. And for the second straight year, I was unable to reach him through the email and phone contacts on the Institute roster. This time, though, I pursued the matter. Prominently displayed at the upper right of the first page of results in a search for his name was a Google information box, which the company calls a knowledge panel. It offered only his birth date and his current age as 93. Reference sites, such as the German Wikipedia and the people-finder ClustrMaps, referred to Professor Raack in the present tense. The first several pages of Google search results, at least, gave no hint that he might have departed this mortal coil. As far as the internet was concerned, and therefore nearly all the world would know, Richard Raack lives. I wouldn't be surprised if nothing has changed online as you read this some months later. And yet we eventually learned that he actually had died on December 29, 2019 in Berlin, Germany. A friend of Richard's told us "he was 91 years old. He died of massive organ failure (old age). He lived a very full life."

Cal State East Bay, where Professor Raack taught, evidently did nothing to note his passing; perhaps it never came to the school's attention. For his quarter-century of service until his retirement in 1990, he rates on the university website a 1-1/2-line listing of his academic credentials among the (ostensibly living) emeriti. An inquiry to the history department

prompted a call from the chair. She explained—more matter-of-factly than sheepishly—that no one on the faculty now knew Professor Raack.

In a way, of course, he does live on. Google Scholar displays links to two dozen of his writings, an incomplete list. They span more than a half-century. Google counts as many as 116 citations for each publication. Historians often make it our mission to keep alive, or revive, the memories of those otherwise forgotten, or nearly so. If we don't take care of our own in this fashion, sometimes no one will.

Oliver Pollak notes: Professor Raack gave his first WIP in 1981 and his most recent in November 2018. That's tenacity.

Maria Sakovich notes: Since Richard died in Berlin, he was likely working up to the very end. My last communication with Richard (31 August/1 September 2018) concerned a book he had recently discovered. He wrote "I finished reading/scan reading, a very weighty, wildly imaginative, paper vol, by Sheri Ritchlin, *A Farm in Marin*. (SF Public doesn't have and won't buy because it was privately printed.) . . . I want to see her creative work approach exposed to others. It's far different from my writings, and those by scholars who are tightly fact-bound." He acknowledged that he was "currently weighed down w/writings, and trying to resurrect my professional life after my stroke," but that he was going to "D and PL [Germany and Poland?] for five weeks beginning 11 September." And he was pleased with his new energy: "I really have made a good recovery. I think that I still have 80% or so of the memory, both visual and verbal, I once had. One calamity: my hands are ruins, as a result of several diseases, all of whose effects the stroke may have enhanced. Thus, typing is down to hunt and peck." Not only tenacity, but creativity I would add, both in the face of some adversity.

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Paul Trimble, who died in June, had been an Institute member since 1999 and always paid his dues a couple of months in advance. Although he valued his connection with the organization, he, like quite a few members, did not participate in our activities. (He volunteered, however, for over 30 years, at the Western Railway Museum.) His and my paths only crossed after the publication of his *Mission and Sacrifice: A Parish History*—of the first Russian Orthodox church in Santa Rosa started by refugee emigrants from the Bolshevik revolution. Paul’s major area of expertise, and passion, however, was Northern California transportation history, especially that of the greater Bay Area. His research included the collection of vintage photographs on this topic which enabled him to write and co-write several books, mostly published by Arcadia Press: *Railways of San Francisco* (2004), *Sacramento Northern Railway and The Bay Bridge* (2005), *Northwest Pacific Railroad* (2006), *Ferries of San Francisco Bay* (2007), *Riverboats of Northern California* (2011). Paul’s first book, *Interurban Railways of the Bay Area*, was published in 1977 and seems to have become a collector’s item; “The Platform Men” (1984) a manuscript book can be found in the collection of the San Francisco History Center of the Public Library. Most recently he was working on a new project with a co-writer and had outlined an article on the Orthodox Saint Peter the Aleut.

Welcome to Our Newest Members

About himself **Michael Sevald** writes: “Having never been an academic, I have had the luxury of learning about a great variety of subjects and taking my time to investigate each one at a leisurely pace. This life-long journey resulted in articles on empire building in ancient Egypt, public memory in Los Angeles, anti-Chinese racism in Redlands, and institutional and community formation of the San Gabriel Valley Jewish community. Currently I am researching

the impact of the environment, the introduction of new communication technology, the advances in horticulture, and the completion of water and transportation projects on the development of the San Gabriel Valley between 1873 and 1886.”

Kieren McCarthy describes himself as “a journalist and writer based in Oakland. I’m from the UK but have been in California for over a decade now. I have a masters degree in mechanical engineering but went into journalism from university. I’ve written for a wide range of national newspapers and magazines, most in the UK. I wrote a book about the extraordinary battle for the internet address Sex.com. Currently I’m writing a book about John McLaren, the superintendent of Golden Gate Park from the 1890s to 1943 and have been digging into San Francisco and California history.”

Bert Gordon is now associate editor of the *Journal of Tourism History* and welcomes questions and/or submissions relevant to the Journal. He presented “With Camera and Guidebook: Tourism and War” virtually at Moscow State Linguistic University, on 14 September. On 27 October he will discuss the “History and Legacy of Mills College” also online, for the Oakland Public Library’s Oakland History Center. In addition to teaching “The West and Its Cultural Traditions” (to the modern period) at Mills, he is also currently offering “England and the British Empire: From Stonehenge to the Present” for Santa Clara University’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) and in November will present “Russia from the 1917 Revolutions to the Present,” for the OLLI program at Cal State Eastbay. Both OLLI courses are virtual.

The Fulbright Association accepted **Leslie Friedman’s** essay, “The Shakers and Tagore Dance,” as part of the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Fulbright program. The

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National School of Drama, in New Delhi, had invited her in 1983 to introduce American modern dance to their artists. This led to her Fulbright Lectureship in India. The events described by Leslie took place at Viswa Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal. While there, art students who wanted to see her perform seized a building and set up a concert. The audience overflowed the building. A power outage during the performance produced a dance lit by the audience's flashlights with shadows and reflections like stars. The university invited her to return for an officially presented concert with a vast, enthusiastic audience. Tagore's poetry and dances and her choreography and technique permeated each other. Results: international cultural understanding and glowing memories. (See: <https://fulbright.org/2021/09/26/the-shakers-and-tagore-dance-leslie-friedman-in-dia-1984/>)

How Effective Was Art in Teaching the Bible to Medieval Laity?

*For the last years of her life, late Institute member **Georgia Wright** wrestled with this question. Her final draft of the paper addressing it has been edited and will soon be available online. (Journal publishers rejected her manuscript several times.) The following is a summary by a friend of Georgia's and former member of the Institute who now lives in Ireland; Sharan is a Medieval historian and author of numerous novels of historical fiction. (Ed.)*

Using the sculptures on the portals of French Gothic churches, Georgia first identified the persons and events represented. She found that many of them must have been unknown to illiterate viewers. Even familiar scenes, such as the Nativity and the Last Judgment, were not always presented in the same way. Unfamiliar symbols were used and Old Testament

characters were added, even though they were rarely mentioned in sermons.

In looking at how the average lay person might have learned to identify the "sermons in stone," Georgia found that there were few ways for them to do so, and many led to inaccurate interpretations. She gives examples of bishops who were themselves confused about biblical stories and their meaning.

Sermons in the vernacular were rare, and these mainly focus on behavior. Good Christians were to be taught the Our Father and the Creed, but in Latin. These were no better than magic incantations. Essential parts of the faith—the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Ascension—were considered beyond the understanding of the laity.

One route to learning was through vernacular stories, acted out by poets and *jongleurs* in taverns or the courts of lords. These were necessarily short but did include events easy to visualize, such as Adam, Eve, and the serpent; Noah and the Flood; and Moses. The Crucifixion was displayed in every church, but the vernacular tales often added events not in the Gospels. A favorite was the apocryphal story of the Roman soldier Longinus piercing Jesus's side with his spear.

Georgia concludes the paper with examples from many French portals, especially St. Denis. These demonstrate the wide variety of images used. She posits that the sculptors were the ones who chose how the subjects were presented. In at least one case, the sculpture didn't fit the space allotted, causing the message to be lost.

Her final assessment is that the average medieval person, peasant or lord, would have only a superficial understanding of Christianity and that the images the illiterate were meant to learn from were too varied and confused to be of any use in understanding the faith.

— *Sharan Newman*

that “the labor of early monastic women helped to advance what was arguably the greatest achievement of the Middle Ages: the preservation of the cultural heritage of Western civilization.”

My own awareness of this book antedates its publication by many years because of my friendship with the author. Her first book, co-written with her late husband Walter—*Invitation to an Inquest* (1965)—was the first substantial analysis of the case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, whose execution as spies rocked the world in 1952. For many years, as elders in our community will recall, it was gospel in the Left that both Rosenbergs were innocent. When the Schneirs reported documentary evidence of Julius’s guilt that emerged in 1995, their truth-telling damned them in the eyes of their former comrades. “My allegiance is to the truth,” Walter told an enraged former comrade who phoned to berate him. Miriam’s new book shows how “truth” can hide in obscure corners, awaiting a fresh eye.

Miriam Schneir established herself as an authority on American feminism through two ground-breaking anthologies of documents that are still foundational in college curricula. That emphasis on documents—as well as the challenges of their interpretation—underlies the new book. Like her anthologies and *Invitation to an Inquest*, the book exemplifies scholarship unafraid to venture down untrodden pathways—a search conducted, like that of many Institute members, in the absence of strong institutional support.

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