

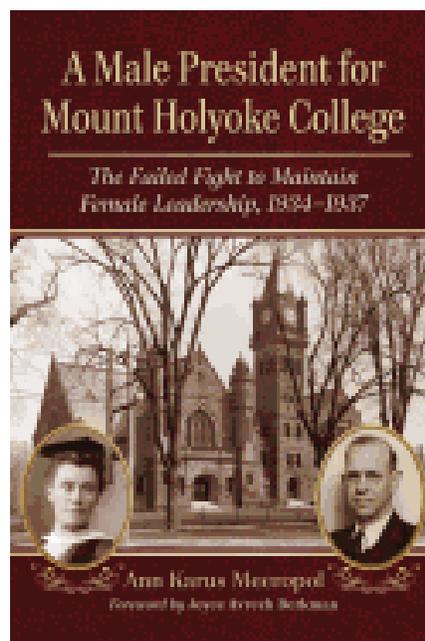
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review: A Male President for Mount Holyoke College: The Failed Fight to Maintain Female Leadership, 1934-1937

by Ann Karus Meeropol

Reviewed by Frinde Maher



A Male President for Mount Holyoke College: The Failed Fight to Maintain Female Leadership, 1934-1937 by Ann Karus Meeropol (McFarland 2014)

For almost two hundred years the histories of women's colleges in the United States have offered both examples of and templates for women's wider struggle for equality. The story of the 1937 presidential succession at Mt. Holyoke College, one of the early centers of higher education for women, shows vividly that these battles must be fought and refought in every generation. This book is a detailed and complex account of the ultimately failed struggle by the leaders of Mt. Holyoke to maintain their commitments to female leadership. From 1901 until 1937 Mary Woolley, the President, not only built the college into a strong and influential voice and exemplar for women's education. She also showed how educated women leaders might perform on a larger world stage. She was the sole American woman delegate to the 1931 Conference on the Reduction and Limitations of Armaments in Geneva, capping a series of national and international roles: member of the American Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations, acting President of the American Association of University Women, major speaker at the Sixth Conference on the Cause and Cure of War in 1931 in Washington, DC.

By the time of the Mount Holyoke Centennial in 1937, the new President of Mt. Holyoke had just been elected by the Board of Trustees. His name was Roswell Gray Ham and he came to Mt. Holyoke from Yale. In the Mt. Holyoke *Alumnae Quarterly* of November 1936 the President-elect was quoted as saying in part, "I see woman as the housekeeper of civilization, of the world's culture." (137) According to Meeropol, in subsequent months and years as President, Ham focused on the college rather than on any engagement with the wider world, with mixed results for the quality of the faculty and for student development. The highly qualified female-dominated faculty became one dominated by males, a number of them from Yale. Woolley's broader vision was lost.

Most of this book is a careful reconstruction of the process by which the Mount Holyoke Board of Trustees, dominated by powerful businessmen and their female allies, arranged for the successor to Mary Woolley to be a man. This upsetting of all expectations for Mt. Holyoke's future leadership prevailed in the face of the strong, eloquent but ultimately ineffectual voices of faculty, students, alumnae and, not least, Mary Woolley herself. Meeropol expertly guides the reader through a dense thicket of documentation – letters, press releases, newspaper articles – all that a compendious archive might offer the researcher.

The arguments she quotes for and against recruiting a man for the job are eloquent examples of the discourses surrounding single-sex education and the education of women generally, discourses that persist today. For example, one eager alumna wrote to Ham that "if there is anything that Mt. Holyoke needs, it is just what you can bring – a good healthy Western breeze, a normal family in the President's house, and a masculine point of view." (128) Woolley's closest relationship was with the woman she lived with, Jeannette Marks, and this example of overt

lesbian-baiting was typical of many contemporary reactions across the world of women's colleges to the leadership of unmarried women.

But on the other hand, from another alum: "We have a tradition of the widening of opportunities for women...We don't teach or preach feminism, we have never thought of it as something to be taught. All we want at Mt. Holyoke is the right to use what brains the Lord gave us.... So long as the men's colleges maintain a closed door against women on their faculties, so long as opportunities for women are limited, our [resistance] to your appointment is natural." (146)

The story as Meeropol tells it is fascinating on its own terms, and anyone who has wondered about the politics of university life, presidential searches above all, will get a vivid picture of the ups and downs of a process whose outcome was never by any means certain. Indeed it was Meeropol's access to the Woolley archives at Mt. Holyoke that spurred her to undertake her multiyear exploration into the case; the blow-by-blow descriptions of the different phases of the struggle are the biggest strengths of the book.

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But the story she tells also has a wider significance. As she points out, the replacement of women by men in positions of leadership in the academy in the 1930's and afterwards also represents a reassertion of male corporate power over the academy in general. Women like Mary Woolley, Frances Perkins (a Mt. Holyoke grad who came back unsuccessfully to take up the cause of a female succession) and their like were not only feminists in the broadest sense of fighters for women's equality, they were advocates for peace, for the rights of working men and women, and for progressive social change. Prominent among such women were not only Woolley herself, but also M. Carey Thomas at Bryn Mawr, Virginia Gildersleeve at Barnard, and Ellen Pendleton at Wellesley. (Not to mention of course Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams, and many other women in the forefront of the peace, labor and suffragist movements of the early twentieth century.)

The men who sought to replace them in positions of power were businessmen. They were people who no doubt sincerely thought a woman's happiest and proper place was in the home, but they also thought that women's education needed a narrower and more strictly domestic focus than leaders like Woolley envisioned. As Meeropol puts it, "The strength that women had gained in leadership provoked fear and resentment and the urge among men to put women 'back in their place.'" (180) When this first generation of powerful women academics departed from

the scene, it was to be almost half a century, until the 1970's, before Second Wave feminism reignited the struggle for equality and parity in women's education.

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This reviewer went to a college (Radcliffe), which went out of existence in the 1970's because Harvard wanted it so. The only remaining vestige of Radcliffe is the Radcliffe Institute, set up originally to help struggling early-career women scholars and now an institution rewarding only already prominent scholars of both sexes. I taught for 27 years at Wheaton College, a single sex college for women, which, like Mt. Holyoke, benefitted in its early years from the visionary leadership of women such as Mary Lyon and Mary Woolley herself. Wheaton went co-ed, like Harvard, in the late 1980's by admitting men, the only way the trustees could see to keep the college afloat. Although Wheaton briefly considered a program for older working women, like the Comstock scholars at Smith and other such programs elsewhere, the board ultimately decided for gender rather than social class diversity. As at Harvard, the money to keep Wheaton going came from men, not women, the wealthy themselves rather than their wives.

No doubt the stories of these related events and others like them are as complex and multifaceted as the story Meeropol tells. And no doubt similar questions about the pivotal role of individuals, as opposed to the sweep of historical inevitability, should and will persist. Yet, as noted above, this fight at Mt. Holyoke was symptomatic, even paradigmatic, of many larger political and cultural

shifts. Women of the teens and 1920's gained the suffrage, entered higher education and gained advanced degrees in record numbers, had substantial careers, and were heavily involved in the leadership of the new professions of social and community work. Yet while the rest of the country was moving left in the 1930's, women's progress faltered. As Meeropol points out, "In the context of the Depression women all over the world were losing out as men sought to take for themselves a larger share of shrinking opportunities." (182) Indeed the Depression retarded women's progress in every arena. The scarce jobs available became men's province. New Deal programs and the rise of the labor movement overwhelmingly benefitted men.

Meeropol might usefully have given readers much more of this wider context, and in fact Joyce Berkman, in her very useful *Foreword*, sums up some of the literature on the decline of feminism in the 1930's. Nevertheless this book explores a powerful microcosm of some of the female progress that was lost in many sectors of society, not just at Mt. Holyoke, and not just at other women's colleges, over the decades that began in the 1930's. It was to be 40 years, and well into the next stage of the women's movement, before Mt. Holyoke again had a female president.



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