Beecher, Catharine Esther, 1800-1878

1800–1878, American educator, b. East Hampton, N.Y.; daughter of Lyman Beecher. She first taught in New London, Conn., and in 1824 founded a girls’ school in Hartford. Later she organized the Western Female Institute in Cincinnati (1832) and similar institutions in Quincy, Ill., Milwaukee, and Burlington, Iowa. Author of works on religion, health, and domestic science (which she introduced in her schools), Beecher was indefatigable in the promotion of liberal education for women, although she opposed woman suffrage.


Summary Article: Beecher, Catharine (1800-1878)
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Catharine Beecher was, in the mid-19th century, the most influential American proponent of what, more recently, has been called difference feminism, the belief that the capacities of women, while not inferior, are fundamentally different from those of men. In this regard, she played an important role in justifying a great expansion in the employment of women as teachers in common (elementary) schools.

Beecher was the daughter of the Rev. Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), a leading evangelical; her siblings included novelist and reformer Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) and celebrated preacher Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887).

Concluding that, as she wrote her father in 1823, “there seems to be no very extensive sphere of usefulness for a single woman but that which can be found in the limits of a school-room,” she gave early evidence of her energy and executive ability by establishing the Hartford Female Seminary, which offered young women an education comparable to that which young men could receive in college. This was by no means just a finishing school; she told her students, “A lady should study, not to shine, but to act.” Although her school was a considerable success, by 1831 she left it to give her own desire for activity greater scope.

By 1835 Lyman Beecher was president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, founded in 1829 to train Presbyterian ministers for the expanding frontier; his widely distributed book, A Plea for the West—an expansion of his fund-raising lectures—stressed the urgency of Protestant efforts to reproduce the educational and religious institutions of New England so as to protect against alleged Catholic schemes to dominate the Ohio Valley. His daughter Catharine reinforced this message with her own Essay on the Education of Female Teachers (1835) in which she warned, “The education of the lower classes is deteriorating, as it respects moral and religious restraints, ... and at the same time thousands and thousands of degraded foreigners, and their ignorant families, are pouring into this nation at every avenue.” She called for sending well-prepared women to teach on the frontier and thus claim it for Protestantism and civilization.

In a succession of widely read books, including The Moral Instructor for Schools and Families: Containing Lessons on the Duties of Life (1838), Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School (1843), The Duty of American Women to Their Country (1845), The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy (1846), and The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Women (1851), Beecher promoted a view of women as uniquely
fitted to be moral guides of society and teachers of children. This required, she wrote in 1851, that
“teaching should become a profession for women, as honorable and as lucrative for her as the legal,
medical, and theological professions are for men” and that women receive an education comparable to
that of men.

In addition to her advocacy efforts, she was instrumental, in the 1840s and 1850s, in recruiting and
raising funds to send hundreds of women, mostly from New England, to the frontier as teachers. This
effort anticipated the similar movement of New England women into the South to educate freed
slaves in the 1860s.

If hundreds of women went west to teach, thousands staffed the schools of New England: By 1840,
61% of teachers in Massachusetts were women, and that increased to 80% by 1861; similar
developments took place in Connecticut, New Hampshire, and New York. Although local school
committees were often reluctant to entrust their schools to women, even with the considerable
advantage of their low pay, Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and other common school reformers were
eager to promote the hiring of women to make it possible to expand the supply of schooling without a
Corresponding increase in cost.

For these reformers, Beecher's widely read books on the emerging role of women were a godsend.
Her argument that women were uniquely fitted to be the instructors of youth, in a natural extension of
their biological destiny as mothers, became a staple of the case for hiring women to replace more
Expensive men. Her accompanying argument for collegiate-level education for women was largely
Ignored, and the efforts of the reformers went instead into creating “normal schools,” which focused
Almost exclusively on preparing young women to teach the elementary school curriculum.

See also
Feminist Perspectives, Lyon, Mary, Normal Schools, Peabody, Elizabeth Palmer, Willard, Emma Hart

Further Readings

- Bunkle, P. Sentimental womanhood and domestic education, 1830-1870. History of Education
- Preston, J. A. Domestic ideology, school reformers, and female teachers: Schoolteaching becomes
University Press.

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