The New Woman

At the turn of the century, Alice Freeman Palmer, middle-aged, respected, active, and knowledgeable, represented the very essence of what pundits, commentators, and even a few of her own sex had christened the New Woman. She was one of the new educated women whose professional training was on a par with that of her male colleagues. She had received her baccalaureate with honors from the University of Michigan in 1876 and done graduate work in history. She had earned her own living and been economically independent since she was nineteen, teaching and serving as principal in midwestern secondary schools before accepting a professorship at Wellesley College in 1879. She became Wellesley's first real, and clearly seminal, president on the death in 1881 of Henry Fowle Durant, Wellesley's founder, who personally guided the college during its first years. She resigned the presidency when she married but continued to be a major influence on Wellesley College for the rest of her life from the board of trustees.

Her role in higher education expanded, rather than contracted, with her marriage. She became a member of the Massachusetts State Board of Education at a time when teacher training was burgeoning all over the country, an influential supporter of the Annex in its struggle to become Radcliffe College, an advisor to Barnard, an almost perennial officer of Collegiate Alumnae, the rapidly growing and influential organization of college women that later became the American Association of University Women, and the commencement speaker at more graduation exercises than any other women of her era. She was chosen by William Rainey Harper when he opened the University of Chicago to be his first dean, and became his close advisor. She was independent, successful, useful, and one of the best-known women of her time. Although marriage limited her options, it did not result in her being completely submerged in her husband's world. Instead, as a married woman, she established her own identity. In important ways she had taken control of her own life from the time she was a child. She belonged to a new breed--the New Woman.

By 1900 the concept of the New Woman had almost replaced the cult of domesticity and the doctrine of spheres as well as its mid-nineteenth-century corollary, the Ideal of Real Womanhood, as the ideological totem around which women's position in society was viewed by the educated public. Press and pulpit now used the idea of the New Woman as their point of departure when fulminating on the issue of women's proper place. The New Woman, with her younger sister the Gibson girl, had taken her place in American society.

The phrase New Woman was coined originally by Henry James and intended by him to characterize American expatriates living in Europe: women of affluence and sensitivity, who despite or perhaps because of their wealth exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting on their own. The term New Woman always referred to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic. However, when it came into general use in the United States for the first time, it was attached to the new American professional women emerging in increasing numbers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Most of them were college educated. Often these women, like Alice Freeman Palmer and her University
of Michigan classmates and friends Lucy Salmon, Angie Chapin, and Mary Marston, were trained at or teaching in the new women's colleges. Or like Eliza Mosher and Cora Benneson, two other early University of Michigan graduates, they pursued careers in medicine or law. They were professionally trained, career and role conscious, and usually self-supporting for a major part or all of their lives. They represented a new generation of American women, independent from male control and as likely to be assisting as receiving help from their families from whom they frequently lived apart. They organized their lives in patterns similar to those of single professional women today.

The New Woman departs from earlier nineteenth-century female innovators, especially social reformers, in her emphasis on taking responsibility for her own life and her independence from male control. As Nancy Cott has said, the New Woman "stood for self-development as contrasted to self-sacrifice or submergence in the family." 4 It is this emphasis on independence that makes her truly new. She is more than a good mother, a good wife, a good daughter. In fact, she need be none of those because she can stand independently.

The concept of the New Woman was not static. In the 1890s the emphasis was on economic independence and professionalism. In the first decades of the twentieth century the term New Woman was used to describe all innovators: reformers, athletes, scientists, Marxists, Bohemians, and aviators. The Jazz Age flapper defined the phalanx in the 1920s. 5 The flapper was more intent on sexual and personal freedom and taking charge of her life in terms of manners and morals, the right to drink or wear short skirts, for example, than a vocation. In this she more closely resembled James's original concept, which was concerned in most part with relatively superficial social conventions that set the behavior of upper-class American young women quite apart from their European counterparts, such as the lack of chaperones, absence of close parental supervision, and freer courtship patterns. 6 But common to all generations of the New Woman was an emphasis on independence from male control. For example, Daisy Miller, one of James's American heroines, asserted, "I've never allowed a gentleman to dictate to me or to interfere with anything I do." 7

However the economic component of the independence waxed and waned. To the first generation of the New Woman, the one to which Alice Freeman Palmer belonged, professional and economic autonomy were paramount. Manners and morals took second place. While even the reformer grandmother of the New Woman had experimented with modifying social conventions, for example dress reform, the New Woman of the 1880s and 1890s found definition of her status not in the clothes she wore or in shocking social postures, but in financial independence and a career. It was in terms of her career, rather than manners and morals, that Alice Freeman Palmer identified herself. She conformed easily to the social mores of her time. There are occasional hints of the post-World War I New Woman in Alice Freeman Palmer, the freedom with which she accepted sexual attraction as a major factor in her relationship with George Palmer, for example. But the Victorian in her also carefully cherished earlier social codes. She could meet her lover clandestinely in a hotel room or the stateroom of a ship, but she did not invite discovery, as might the 1920s flapper, of these violations of accepted conventions.

Palmer's generation of New Women included the first generation of college-educated women. University-educated, professionally successful, aware of her expertise in her chosen field and
eager to use it, Alice Freeman Palmer articulated a dominant voice in the burgeoning arena of higher education for women by the 1890s, and it was that voice which provided the core of her identity as a New Woman. She had trained for her job and expected to be, and was, paid a salary for the positions that she held. Unlike activist women Frances Willard and Susan B. Anthony, for example, she was never (while single) dependent on the vagaries of lecture fees, voluntary collections, and freelance writing for her support. She saw her mission as educating women and guaranteeing their place as professional educators. At Wellesley she helped to perpetuate the secure base professional women faculty had established for themselves in the women's colleges, a beachhead they maintained until World War I and in some places until World War II. At the University of Chicago she attempted, with much less success, to create the same opportunities for women in coeducational universities.

It was Alice Freeman Palmer's recognized position as an educator that placed her among the ranks of the New Woman. To quote George Perry Morris, author and newspaper man:

> If President Bumsted of Atlanta University came north to seek counsel and sympathy, he found it in Mrs. Palmer. Presidents of colleges in foreign lands founded by American Christians turned instinctively to her for advice when they returned to this country in quest of teachers or funds. Donors to educational institutions for women in this country sought her opinion as to the form their gifts should take. Presidents of colleges for men often relied on her practical advice when facing administrative crises, and trusted her judgement in choosing candidates for executive and professorial positions.

The New Woman was attached to her by her contemporaries, but with some reservations. President William Herbert Perry Faunce of Brown University described her as blending the ideals of the old and "of the new woman, the synthesis being a coalition and not a mere adhesion." She was seen as proving "that an American woman with culture and spirit can be useful to state and society at large while obedient to the highest domestic ideals."

Of course, what these men were praising was that she eventually married and seemed to preside happily over a home. Unlike her fellow college president, M. Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr, Palmer was never rebellious about accepting the trappings of women's role. When she married, she had no qualms as did the suffragist Lucy Stone about losing her name. She reveled in being called Mrs. Palmer, although she carefully put the tokens of her academic respectability, Ph.D. and LL.D., after it. Like a true New Woman, however, she never easily relinquished her autonomy, and the painful negotiation that preceded her marriage and at the time of her acceptance of a position at Chicago was a careful exercise in compromise for both her and her husband, although he undoubtedly won the larger share of the bargain.

Although she wanted control over her own life, Alice Freeman Palmer's values were conservative. Palmer was in many ways not a feminist. The term, of course, was not used in her lifetime. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, feminism has been defined, redefined, and differentiated into half a dozen subgroups, one of which has been called "life-process feminism" by Joyce Antler, and defined as "the personal ways in which an individual struggles to achieve autonomy by confronting gender-defined issues at each stage of the life cycle." If one
accepts this definition as one aspect of the feminist tradition, Alice Freeman Palmer qualifies as a feminist, but only in part. Certainly her decision to pursue higher education, temporarily eschew marriage, and eventually marry into a partnership (where the negotiation of what marriage would mean to the living of her life and the pursuit of her goals) were gender-defined issues. They would not have arisen in the same way had she been a man. Nor would a man have settled for the same resolution of them. A man would not have been forced to choose between marriage and the presidency of Wellesley, nor would he have had to compromise in accepting an administrative post at Chicago. Gender inevitably shaped her life.

She was very effective at promoting higher education for women. But she hung back, quite consciously, from espousing militant movements. The suffragists made attempts from time to time to engage her in their cause. She was likely to ridicule their efforts. "I have another invitation to be the Wendell Phillips of the woman suffrage movement . . ." she reported to George Palmer in 1887. "They think I could make a fortune. I suppose I ought to ask your advice before undertaking it, for it might interfere with the other three days of the week." Not until late in her life did she publicly commit herself to the vote. She espoused temperance and peace, those mainstream movements of the late nineteenth century, but so did everyone else. She spent no time in the settlement house movement. Although sympathetic to the oppressed, she was not really a reformer, as her mother had been. She was a professional, as were so many of the New Women, be they conservative or liberal in their politics.

Palmer's lack of ideology is perhaps partly explained by the fact that one reason young Alice Freeman followed the path she did was simple expedience. She both wanted and needed to earn her own living as did many of the first generation of college-educated women. Although she was bright, intellectually curious, and enjoyed academic challenges, she did not set out to change the world. First and foremost she needed financial independence. She chose to accomplish this in a way that she would enjoy. She performed a mildly venturesome act when she matriculated at the age of seventeen at the University of Michigan in 1872 and became the first member of her family to seek a baccalaureate, but her venturesomeness was within the parameters of acceptable female behavior for her era and class. At the same time, it was perfectly clear that her education was expected to provide economic rewards not only to her, but to her family.

Professionalism and careerism, not reform, provided the major themes of Alice Freeman Palmer's life. A life of service, but service exchanged for a salary, was the pattern she followed, a pattern also followed by many of her contemporaries. She earned money because she needed it. She enjoyed (most of the time) the career that brought her the salary that met her economic needs, but her private papers contain little talk, especially in the earlier years, about her professional contribution to a better society or to enhancing women's new role.

The earlier generation of activist women had been either single or married--marital status was not a condition of their participation in the public world of volunteerism or reform movements. Some of this generation, usually if they were either spinsters or widowed (for example, Susan B. Anthony and Frances Willard), made their livelihoods through the causes they espoused. Others received support from their husbands and families. The first generation of college-educated professional women were supported in a different way, by being paid a salary for practicing their professions. They were slow to marry and almost never married during the active phase of their
professional careers, not because men were afraid of their accomplishments or found educated women undesirable as mates, nor because the women themselves cherished their independence too dearly to find marriage unattractive. They sacrificed their emotional independence gladly enough in close, demanding relationships with other women that did not bar them from earning their own livings. And Alice Freeman, while she found the repeated proposals she received a nuisance at times, never discouraged the men whose company she enjoyed from making offers of marriage. Postponement of marriage was largely an economic decision because of the overriding social dictum that middle-class married women did not work for money.

She became an independent professional woman, at least in part, because it was imperative she achieve economic autonomy and financially assist her family which suddenly found itself in straightened circumstances. However a seventeen-year-old female did not leave the rural Susquehanna Valley in 1872 to be one of the first women students at the University of Michigan without a considerable drive to control her own life and prove her own worth. And it was not long before she had translated practical economic need into a strongly felt mission to further women's right to higher education and to careers in higher education on an equal basis with men.

She also wanted marriage and a home and probably children. At the height of her career, when she was president of Wellesley College, she fell in love. She then faced a new dilemma. Should she sacrifice her career or fight to preserve it? She fought, lost her career in some ways, but preserved her position in the world of higher education. Hers is the story of the evolution of a New Woman in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, an evolution represented in her triumphs and her disappointments, her successes and her failures in asserting control over her own life.

There are many subthemes to Alice Freeman Palmer's story and all of them complement the general story of the New Woman: the importance of networking among early professional women, the inevitable part that the old concept of "womanliness" played in the career of even the successful nineteenth-century New Woman, the role of the Midwest in the creation of the eastern women's colleges, and Palmer's failed attempt to secure a firm and lasting equality of opportunity for women in the coeducational university.

One of these subthemes documents in some detail the role of the Midwest, especially the old Northwest, in the professionalization of women educators and development of the eastern women's colleges. Innovation in women's higher education began in the old Northwest. When the new eastern women's colleges, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, and later Mount Holyoke as it moved to collegiate status, and Radcliffe as it progressed from Harvard Annex to affiliate status, had to find faculty to teach the young women eager to enroll in the new collegiate programs. Men, trained in the East, were of course available and used at Radcliffe, Vassar, and Smith, but Wellesley was committed to a female faculty. No eastern colleges, except a few struggling institutions that were little more than ladies' seminaries, provided collegiate training for women until 1872 when Cornell opened its doors a tiny crack. But by 1872 the University of Michigan had women students in three departments. Also, Oberlin and Antioch had been awarding baccalaureate degrees to women since 1837, and those degrees represented solid training. It was to the old Northwest that the new women's colleges looked in large measure for faculty and staff. A recent study laments the dearth of research on the migration of eastern-educated women to
other parts of the country. 16 Actually much of the migration was the other way. At least in terms of professional training one can say that the New Woman migrated from west to east as well as the other way around.

In December of 1925, the Wellesley Alumnae Magazine catalogues in a brief article, "Michigan Women at Wellesley," eighteen Michigan- trained women who taught at Wellesley in the nineteenth century. 17 The Michigan contribution to Wellesley's seminal decades was by far the largest academic influence on the college. Mary Sheldon Barnes in history, Katharine Coman in economics, Olive Mary Marston and Angie Chapin in Greek, Anna Bardwell Gelston in mathematics, and Lucy Andrews in ethics were only part of the roster. There were few places other than Michigan from which to recruit. Although most of the new state universities west of the Alleghenies reluctantly permitted women to join their student bodies, they had yet to establish their academic credentials. Michigan was the oldest of the transmountain institutions and traced its roots to a Detroit academy established in 1817, twenty years before Michigan achieved statehood. By the 1870s it was a full-scale university, the largest in the land, with a faculty whose scholarship was nationally recognized and with standards as high as any American university. No wonder it was a primary source of women to staff the faculties of the new women's colleges.

Another aspect of Palmer's career as a professional educator is even more remarkable. After her marriage she commuted to the University of Chicago for three years, from 1892 to 1895, serving as dean and close advisor to President William Rainey Harper, helping to build a great new graduate university in the Midwest that would provide equal opportunity for women as faculty, staff, and students. Here again the Midwest pioneered, providing the New Woman with opportunities that would not open to her in the great eastern universities for three-quarters of a century. And this work of a New Woman at Chicago had lasting effects, especially on research. Rosalind Rosenberg sees the new academic women, especially at Chicago, many of them there at least indirectly because of Palmer, as vanguards in abolishing male and female stereotypes. By 1920 a generation of research centered in Chicago had destroyed the myth of the rational man and irrational woman. 18

Alice Freeman Palmer's career in higher education took place during a period of enormous expansion in college enrollments as well as significant expansion in the scope of education, especially training for the professions. For the first time women were instrumentally active in the direction these new developments took, and in the initial stages Palmer played a key role. Women not only influenced old scholarly fields, they also developed new ones, like sanitary science (later public health) and social work. Palmer, especially at Chicago, helped set the stage. She was a leading actor in higher education during a period of flux not to be duplicated until after World War II. This was also an era when the goals of higher education, especially undergraduate education, were being articulated as the "well-rounded" person who had been prepared for the challenges of modern life. It was the pattern of campus life that Palmer and Marion Talbot attempted to establish at Chicago and spread from there to other coeducational institutions that best embraced this goal.

Alice Freeman Palmer's biography is also the story of a marriage, of changing gender roles that the New Woman both faced and helped to bring about. It is the story of one woman's dilemma
and one woman's solution, or perhaps one couple's solution. This too makes her a pioneer among the New Women. Many of Alice Freeman's generation of educated professional women who chose active, challenging careers did not marry. Alice Freeman eventually made a husband and home her life choice, but in such a way that she preserved her professional stature and prestige. Her position as the dominant voice in women's higher education was not thereby challenged. In this she foreshadowed the second generation of the New Woman like Crystal Eastman or Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who came of age in the first decade of the twentieth century. The second generation often married but, as Eastman said, was not "satisfied with love, marriage and a purely domestic career. But she wants husband, home, and children, too. How to reconcile these two desires in real life, that is the question." 19

Alice Freeman Palmer's story also had a purely personal side. Along with the professionalism and independence that distinguished the New Woman and made Alice Freeman Palmer one of them, she brought a magic, a charisma, that transformed a simple human relationship into high excitement for those who knew her. Lucy Sprague Mitchell, a prominent educator who was one of her primary disciples, wrote that "to me, she seemed--and still seems--one of the great people in the world. . . . Her zest for life, her capacity to listen as wholeheartedly as she talked, her versatility, her light touch even in executive matters in which she was a master, made her literally unique." 20 Lyman Abbott, Boston clergyman, critic, and an older contemporary of Freeman Palmer concurred. He wrote that from their first meeting she fascinated him. She seemed to him "like an opal, you can be sure to find a wonderful life in it, but with what changing colours it will glow when you next look at it, you cannot tell." 21

As anthropologist and educator Catherine Bateson has pointed out, everyone crafts her own life, but the innovative life is harder to live than one that unfolds through preexisting paths worn smooth by generations of use. 22 Alice Freeman Palmer chose some well-worn paths and made many new ones for herself. The problems she faced and the solutions she found were sometimes out of the past and sometimes foreshadowed those arrived at by women in the twentieth century. Her life is a vivid case study in the evolution of the New Woman.

Chapter One Notes


2 The term was in popular, lay use by the end of the century. For example, Jennie Muzzey Covert, a pioneer coed at the University of Wisconsin described herself as "an incipient 'new woman' " when reminiscing of her 1870s college career. (Jennie Muzzey Covert, "At the Dawn of Coeducation," Wisconsin Alumni Magazine, March 1901, 243.)


7 Ibid., 72.

in *Gilded Age Washington: Race, Gender, and Professionalization* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 162-68.


10 Ibid., 171.

11 Ibid.


13 One historian of higher education saw Palmer reflect the ambivalence toward the domesticity ideal that was institutionalized at Wellesley, in that as president she attempted to combine strong academic programs with the cultivation of the ideal of true womanhood. Frankfort saw this dichotomy become a personal crisis over the issue of marriage. Roberta Wein [Frankfort], "Women's Colleges and Domesticity," *History of Education Quarterly* (Spring 1974): 31-47; Frankfort, *Collegiate Women: Domesticity and Career in Turn of the Century America*. (New York: New York University Press, 1977), chaps. 2-3.

14 Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, January 9, 1887. Typescripts of correspondence between Alice Freeman Palmer and George Herbert Palmer, Wellesley College Archives. Hereafter cited as Wellesley Typescripts. Originals of these letters are to be found in the George Herbert Palmer Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

15 Alice Freeman Palmer’s resistance to reform causes was not necessarily typical of professional women. See Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Introduction.


