

**San Jose State University**

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**From the Selected Works of Patricia Evridge Hill**

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**<em>Natural Allies: Women's Associations in  
American History</em>, by Anne Firor Scott**

Patricia Evridge Hill, *Lander College*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/patricia-hill/25/>

and its virtual exclusion of black veterans—except as comic relief—exemplified “themes destined to be played out over the next thirty years across the American North.”

Of necessity, McConnell devotes several chapters to the origins, development, and maturing of the Grand Army of the Republic. Largely an institutional study, those chapters weave together insightful comments on the texture of northern culture, the electoral dynamics of veterans’ politics, and the generational clash between the hoary soldiers and younger citizens remote from the Civil War’s crucible.

McConnell’s closing chapters are a delight. Writing intellectual history at its best, he explores the aging veterans’ cosmology, their sense of historical destiny. With a spirit of “republican millennialism” they understood the American Revolution as the genesis of an agrarian experiment in self-government, so their campaigns from 1861 to 1865 became an “Armageddon, a climactic struggle from which the nation” emerged redeemed. Tragically for the Union veterans, that vision looked only backward to an imagined agrarian paradise in which independent farmers gladly left the plow in answer to the patriot’s call. Their concept of individual virtue failed to comprehend the late nineteenth century’s world of racial change, industrial regimentation, and capitalistic expansion.

The lack of a literary coda flaws this otherwise excellent book. McConnell closes his work at 1900, a year of no particular significance. Well into their sixties, most veterans were still viable, marching steadily into the twentieth century. The author might well have traced the Grand Army of the Republic’s declining years, resolved its last battles with its Confederate counterpart, and given the reader the satisfaction of a story fully told. In spite of that mild criticism, McConnell has crafted a model work, suggesting that the Civil War’s ultimate importance commenced only when the armies disbanded.

Fred Arthur Bailey

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*Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History.* By Anne Firor Scott. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. Acknowledgments, introduction, illustrations, appendix, notes, index. Pp. xii, 242. \$29.95, cloth.)

Anne Firor Scott asserts that her task in *Natural Allies* was “not to write a comprehensive survey of the thousands of [women’s] associations but to make the case for their centrality” to American social and political development.

In so doing, she analyzes the goals of women’s voluntary associations, major patterns of female activism, traits of club leaders, and common themes in the histories of organizations as diverse as Chicago’s elite Fortnightly Club and the Women’s Trade Union League.

Scott identifies three “successive phases” during which early American women organized benevolent societies and later formed groups geared toward moral reform, temperance, and the abolition of slavery. Skills developed during those movements enabled both Northern and Southern women to provide “soldiers’ aid” during the Civil War. Scott does not impose a linear pattern of development on women’s religious organizations, study clubs, and associations devoted to “municipal housekeeping” in the

decades after the Civil War. Indeed, the author calls the process that resulted in the expansion of woman's home-based sphere an "untidy evolution."

In the midst of the elegant narrative readers have come to expect from this pathbreaking historian, Scott casts a critical eye on both her subjects and some of her sources. She offers a lesson in contextual analysis during a discussion of Mary Ritter Beard's *Women's Work in the Municipalities* (1915), a volume "filled with revealing information" yet "disconcertingly light on documentation." Scott attributes Beard's willingness to accept the lack of conflict present in published records of Progressive Era reform groups to the persistence of nineteenth-century social mores that "generally forbade women to speak ill of each other in public."

There are lessons throughout *Natural Allies*. Scott is an ever-present and accessible mentor—encouraging scholars to do more work on women's associations outside the major cities, on black women's missionary societies, and on Catholic and Jewish women's groups. The book concludes with a call for more research and an appendix that at once conveys the breadth of women's work as municipal reformers and serves as a list of topics for future term papers, graduate theses, and monographs.

Patricia Evridge Hill

Lander College

*Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*. Edited by Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991. Preface, introduction, contributors, index. Pp. vi, 202. \$24.00.)

The essays in this volume were first delivered as papers at a Conference on Women in the Progressive Era held at the Smithsonian Institution in 1988. The major interpretative questions revolve around the centrality of women's role in the Progressive movement, the issue of social control, and the use of state authority. The answer to the first question clearly depends on who defines "centrality." Barbara Sicherman's fine work on the career of Alice Hamilton reveals that being central to the action of reform (as women were in great numbers) may not have meant women were central to the power structure. Other essays add additional evidence for pondering this centrality/power dilemma.

The second question of social control is more integral to the overall theme of the book. The essayists show again and again that the middle-class elitism of the Progressives informed their view of lower-class women, while their acceptance of the ideology of essentialism limited their understanding of what reform for women would mean. Alice Kessler-Harris's stimulating essay explains the *Adkins v. Children's Hospital* (1923) decision to deny women a guaranteed minimum wage, even though they also had been excluded from the debate over contractual freedom. Both sides of the wage issue argued from the viewpoint of seeing first women's family role.

It was, after all, the battle for definition of "family" that pervaded the Progressive disputes, so reminiscent of today's battleground over "family values." Eileen Boris's insightful essay shows how the reformers' goals for family clashed with those of ethnic females who both needed to work and needed their children to work (thus they opposed the middle-class "reform" against child labor).