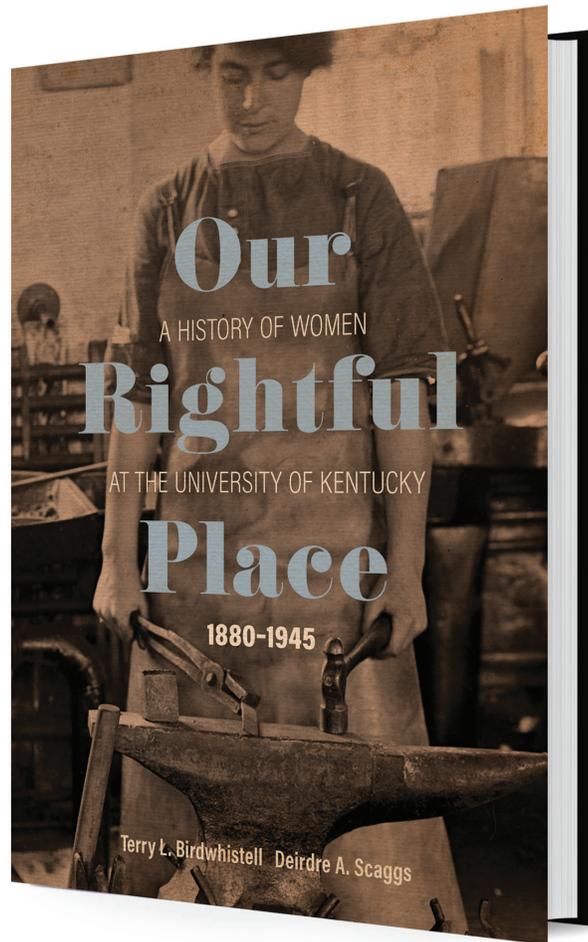


BOOK REVIEW: **Our Rightful Place: A History of Women at the University of Kentucky, 1880-1945**

Our Rightful Place, written by Terry L. Birdwhistell and Deirdre A. Scaggs, details the history of women at the University of Kentucky (UK) from 1880 through the conclusion of World War II. It is a fascinating historical account of the struggle white women faced to secure an equal right to higher education. By the 1950s, this struggle would include African American women. I hope the authors are planning a volume two in order to detail the efforts made by women of color. I would very much like the story to continue to recognize their contributions at UK.

Coeducation in higher education was not openly embraced in the nineteenth century as the preference was to educate women at women's colleges. The book gives an interesting history of how coeducation came to be, specifically in Kentucky institutions. The book does a good job at describing the opportunities, and challenges, faced by each generation of women. What is really interesting is the separation that occurred once women gained access to UK. There were strong efforts to create separate women's spheres within the institution and to keep the sexes separate. Strict rules applied to women students that today seem "oppressive and antiquated." However, when you step back and look at the history, UK's sex-based differentials reflect what was naturally occurring in the United States. Romantic paternalism, or the separate spheres mentality, is the notion that the sexes should occupy separate spheres. Men would operate in the workplace and women would be responsible for domestic responsibilities. This book details how that separation arose, but shifted over time, to create a coeducational learning environment that reflected changes in societal norms.

White women first gained entrance to public higher education at UK in 1880. With access to coeducational universities, "this generation of women students began to redefine what higher education



meant for women and their future." UK was similar to other institutions in that the pathway for women gaining admission was through teacher education. Forty-three women were admitted during the 1880-1881 academic year. One of the original women students at UK, Sophonisba Breckinridge, remembered that "no one expected to see them succeed, but they did, and soon after this the college was obliged to admit other women students from families where there were girls...[who] wanted to do the work."

Once UK moved to its permanent campus in 1882, there was no women's dormitory. As women began to be admitted from counties farther from UK, lack of housing became a major issue. Women who had no family in Lexington had to live in approved boardinghouse facilities. The lack of a women's dormitory limited enrollment. That was not the only issue from an infrastructure perspective. An 1897 inspection by the Board of Trustees committee found the only women's restroom on the campus was "totally insufficient" and made a finding that the "mingling of the sexes" on campus was not "appropriate." In making this determination, the committee cited an incident where a male and female student shared a book when they should have been listening to the instructor. Additionally, the committee recommended the desks be arranged for men and women on opposite sides of the classroom and conversations between the sexes

be forbidden during classes. The authors could find no evidence that these recommendations were ultimately endorsed.

As the nineteenth century ended, Kentucky legislation was enacted allowing married women to own property and make wills. By 1900, women gained control over their earnings and soon secured custodial rights to their children. These changes in legislation, occurring from an all-male legislature, was a precursor for the women's movement that occurred in the twentieth century. Though opportunities were beginning to open up for women students, they still were only seen as potential homemakers or teachers.

Any fan of Kentucky athletics will enjoy reading about the beginnings of physical education for women in the early 1900s. In 1902, women students began organizing their first basketball team. They played their first game in 1903 and no men were allowed to attend. The team was initially successful but that did not ensure its continuance. The 1903 men's basketball team often lost while the community enthusiastically supported the women's team after their victory over its crosstown rival Kentucky University. Though the team was successful, there were internal conversations at UK to limit the games and maintain control over women's basketball. By 1924, the university's Faculty Senate abolished women's intercollegiate basketball. UK women's varsity basketball would not return until 1974.

Admission for women in other departments apart from teacher education or home economics evolved through the years. Margaret Ingels was the first woman to earn an engineering degree from UK in 1916, but also one of the first women in the United States to obtain a degree in mechanical engineering. In 1917, Lena Madessin Phillips was the first woman to earn a UK law degree. She returned to her hometown of Nicholasville and opened her own law practice. These women had a different worldview than the women who came to UK in 1880. Young women entering UK in the early 1900s found it easier to enter academic areas, like engineering and law, that had once been foreclosed to previous women students.

During the 1920s, parents still wanted the college to regulate the activities and morality of their daughters. The Dean of Women's office made significant efforts to monitor the social and academic lives of women students as they "would not make good decisions about their lives and their education." In a 1937 annual report, the Dean of Women's office reported they kept a record of each woman with her family information, "test scores, scholastic achievement, health record, vocational preference, extra-curricular program, loans, money-making activities, personality ratings," and other collected data. Social restrictions emerged. UK announced men and women students could not sit together at men's basketball games during the 1924 season. Women students could not share a meal with a man at any hotel or restaurant after 6pm, without permission, except at the University Cafeteria. Women faced citations for "walking home from the library with a man."

The book details there was little pushback against sex-based social rules in the 1930s. However, the book mentions several writings

authored by female students that indicate the struggle they faced when trying to obtain an education. Debate ensued on campus about whether women could have both a marriage and career upon graduation from UK. This was a really interesting part of the book as it delves into the shifting views of women and their roles in society, both inside and outside of marriage. An editorial in the *Kentucky Kernel*, the student newspaper, questioned the oppressive social restrictions on women. "The time of vigorous discipline has passed; college now stands as a training ground for American youth in preparation for a greater college—the school of life. The modern girl deserves and needs opportunities to prove her ability to properly care for herself."

In July 1946, UK stopped admitting additional female students due to the lack of adequate housing. The number of female faculty decreased along with decreased enrollment of female students at UK by the late 1940s. The authors state that following the war, "women remained mostly relegated to stereotypical roles as devastating as any seen before. Progress continued in the postwar years, but the momentum for equality ebbed and flowed."

Our Rightful Place is an important piece of work detailing the struggles faced by white women at UK. It highlights the pushing by women to make academic gains and progressive steps in society. The book's introduction begins with a quote from UK law professor Carolyn Bratt, chair of the 2001 Commission on Women, established to address women's needs at UK. "We've been able to get things done around the edges and some of them have real impact, but there's a fundamental issue of women being at the table where the real decisions are being made, and there doesn't seem to be a real commitment to making that happen." The authors point out this quote is relevant to women's experiences at UK from their admission in 1880. The book is a really great read for those who enjoy history, especially Kentucky history, and its intersection with women's issues. Its mission is to "uncover how women's roles and place at the university were constructed for and by UK women." The authors far surpassed this aim in creating an enjoyable, and informative, historical record.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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