INTRODUCTION

The Tradition of American Radical Women

For many people the word "radical" brings up images of agitation, angry crowds, and stirring public speeches. It also evokes dedication, commitment, and a struggle against overwhelming odds. The word "women" calls forth mental pictures of the home—privacy, nurture of children, charity, and church work. The two words do not sit together easily: "radical women" is an unfamiliar combination.

From the seventeenth century on there have been women in America who have confronted the Church, the State, the military, big industry, political parties—and demanded radical change. Anne Hutchinson was one of these: a self-taught woman who shook the elders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the tips of their square-toed shoes with her assertion of the right of the individual to interpret religious doctrine.

Radicals are in many ways social artists. They restate the hidden truths of society through working with people and social movements rather than color or line. Like the few genuine artists of any age, they teach people to see with fresh vision. They go to the roots (Latin: *radices*) of social beliefs and reexamine tired slogans and lifeless symbols. They are a source of great vitality and energy for any society.

Since American social mythology portrays women as a conservative force, woman are rarely, if ever, analyzed as radicals. Women seem to fall into two historical groups—saints or wives of famous men. There have been, however, many women who were actors on the public stage, tampering with society's most cherished institutions and laying bare the full absurdities of treasured hypocrisies. From the abolitionists to the Vietnam peace movement, to the struggle for an Equal Rights Amendment, women have played an organic role in social and political change.

Today's women claim they have been cut off from their own traditions. They are right. The only tradition for women that most of us know is that of the suffrage movement. But that is not the tradition of Harriet Tubman, Mother Jones, or Dorothy Day. Theirs is the tradition of radical action on behalf of the slaves, the workers, the poor. Tradition means process. It is the means by which one generation passes its ideas and beliefs on to the next. There has been little sense of the tradition of American radical women because there has been little understanding of women as a political force.

Harriet Tubman conducted guerrilla operations in the South for ten years before the Civil War. Working on the Underground Railroad she freed over three hundred slaves, personally conducting them to Canada when it was no longer safe in the North. It was a feat matched by no other person. During the Civil War she worked as an agent for the Union Army, organizing raids against the plantations in the South.

Mother Jones was one of the most effective labor organizers of the early twentieth century, famous throughout the labor movement for her ability to call workers out on strike and keep them out when no one else could. To some she was a "foul-mouthed old bitch" and to others "the Joan of Arc of the coal fields."

Dorothy Day still leads the Catholic Worker movement, a loosely allied group of people who believe in communal sharing, giving to the poor, and total pacifism. Over the past twenty years she has been in jail countless times for civil disobedience—resistance to the draft in World War II, air raid drills in the 1950s, the war in Vietnam in the 1960s. In the Catholic Worker house on the Bowery of New York she has fed and clothed an army of the hungry and the homeless since she began in 1933. Yet when I said to a friend of hers that she really was a militant radical, they said no, of course not, she's a saint. She may well be, but saints are people apart, people whose life bears little resemblance to one's own. It is always difficult to identify with a saint, and very few public men are ever called saints.

Throughout America's history women have fought for the basic freedoms for which the country was founded—free religion, free speech, the right to assemble, the right to petition the government for the redress of grievances. Yet women were not given the basic right of citizenship—that of the vote—until 1920.

The tradition of radical women who have acted on behalf of the most downtrodden elements of American society has been obscured, buried in historical myths about apolitical women. Even the radical origins of the woman's movement have been lost. Sarah Grimké is remembered chiefly, if at all, as the sister of Angelina Grimké. Together they were the first women to speak in public. They spoke on the abolition of slavery, but it was Sarah Grimké who introduced the unheard-of subject called woman's rights. In 1837 she proposed the political, economic, educational, and religious equality of women. It was a time when the subordinate sphere

of women was viewed to have been decreed by God. In 1837 Sarah Grimké published *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,* the first systematic analysis of the role of women in American society. She dealt not only with white women; she was the first to describe the sexual abuse of black women in slavery and drew a powerful parallel between the position of blacks and women in a patriarchal society (a parallel it took a hundred years to confirm in the work of the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal). Angelina is a "more appropriate" feminist model, since she married, had children, and stopped all public activity after marriage. Sarah never married. Angelina appealed to the women of the South, asking them to influence the men who make the laws. Sarah Grimké proposed that women begin to make the laws themselves. Conventional history can accommodate Angelina, but it cannot take account of Sarah.

One of the young women influenced by Sarah Grimké's writing was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She had a far more radical life than her reputation as the first person to call for woman's suffrage has allowed her.

In the early 1850s she was one of the very first women to wear pants, "bloomers," and to encourage women to leave the prison of corsets and petticoats. In 1866 she was the first woman to run for Congress. For years she was the only woman who would mention the word "divorce," and talked about it publicly as an individual right. She believed that women had to be economically self-sufficient and not dependent on men and marriage as the only means to economic survival. She believed the vote was always a tool, a means to an end, and grew impatient with male reformers who refused to see that there could be no fundamental changes in American society as long as the family structure remained conservative and constricting. Women, like men, had to be able to have both public and private lives.

Women who would act in public have had to redefine their politics and their personal lives. They had to be political *and* social radicals. No matter how radical their ideas or acts, radical men have often been able to live bourgeois domestic lives. This is not true for women; excruciating personal choices were involved.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example, violated some of society's most rigidly held taboos in order to act in a way that was in harmony with her ideas. Although Charlotte Perkins Gilman described

herself as a sociologist rather than as a feminist, in 1898 she attacked two of American society's most cherished institutions, the home and motherhood. She said that the technological age had made the isolated home archaic and that motherhood alone was a primitive way to define a person's identity. She proposed that women become full, functioning members of society rather than occupy the status of half-child, half-adult, which kept them uneducated, untrained for real work, and a vehicle for displaying the wealth of their husbands. She was a successor to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whom she greatly admired. At the turn of the century, Gilman was a conspicuous critic of American materialism and woman as "the priestess of the temple of consumption." To learn of Charlotte Gilman's life is to see American society as an integrated system in which many of the changes advocated in politics and economics cannot come about without changing the basic institutions of American life—home, marriage, child rearing. Ideas we are discovering in the 1970s about the quality of life in a consumer society have their roots in the turn of the century.

Social forms as the building blocks of political change was the subject which fascinated Anna Louise Strong. A specialist in social revolution, she lived for almost thirty years in the Soviet Union and for fourteen in China. She is one of a handful of Westerners to have known and written about the leaders of the Russian and the Chinese revolutions. A unique link with the traditions of the East, her life makes a transition between the American view of the world and the modern history of Russia and China. She had a journalist's skill for spotting an important story, but she also caught details that other journalists never picked up—the politicization of the Moslem women of Russia, the organization of the "bobbed-haired girls" of China. Her most famous story is the "paper tiger" interview with Mao Tse-tung, in which he declared all imperialists to be paper tigers. An exceptional interviewer, she published some of the first interviews with Stalin, Ho Chi Minh, and other major figures of Asia. Even though she is almost unknown to the general American public, her newsletters from Peking were read in the State Department and the CIA and by journalists assigned to write about China. When she died in Peking in 1970, she was honored by the leaders of China, including Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai. She believed that to survive in the modern age one must be able to tran-

scend the limitations of national identity, and her life was proof that it could be done.

Discovering the tradition of American radical women has two important effects. One is that it provides new and important insights into old and incomplete interpretations of the past—the politics of the abolitionist movement, for example, and the two-dimensional interpretations of slavery. The other is that it gives a coherence to the lives of women who have traditionally been portrayed as lone strugglers, isolated voices speaking to an empty audience. Many of these women were aware of one another, asked similar questions about American society, and built on what others had done before them. They were sustained by knowing that there were a few others like them—somewhere.

One of the reasons that every speech Mother Jones ever gave was a history lesson in the labor struggle was that it gave working men and women a sense that they were not acting alone, that they were part of a tradition of struggle, and that their acts were not isolated. In many ways it is awareness of tradition that allows people to overcome personal despair. Without a sense of tradition people act without consciousness or form. Tradition provides connections, and connections give courage. Courage was one trait all these women had in common.

The choice of the seven women who make up this book was made with great difficulty and with the hope that each of them represented a specific problem in the interpretation of women as radicals. When a complete history of American radical women is written it will include many women that I have had to leave out—Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Kate Richards O'Hare, Ida Tarbell, Emma Goldman, to name only a few. I have tried to focus on women who had captured something unique of the American experience, and I have tried to give a broad outline rather than a detailed picture.

Conventional definitions of the radical do not apply to women. In some ways the real subject of this book is successful rebellion. It is a story of women who were survivors, who learned how to go to the roots of the institutional relationships that dominated their lives and to change them. It is impossible to read accounts of life in slavery or of the treatment of immigrant laborers or the use of children in factories without thinking that the way we approvingly use

the phrases "well-adjusted," "politically sophisticated," or "necessary compromise" are ways to shield ourselves from reality. The difference between radicals and other people is that radicals *see* differently, and once having seen a new reality—whether it be for men and women in slavery, bums on the Bowery, laborers in mining towns, oppressed women, peasants in Asia—they cannot rest until they act.

Considering the abuse, public vilification, and physical danger that often accompanied their work, it is often difficult to even guess at what kept them going. But it is clear from their writings, personal interviews, and statements about themselves that they knew they were messengers to the future.