

Pro-Life Feminism: Yesterday and Today

Edited by Mary Krane Derr, Rachel MacNair, and Linda Naranjo-Huebl

\$24.99 (Amazon.com)

Reviewed by Laura Echevarria

Pro-Life Feminism: Yesterday and Today is a very interesting and informative look at the broad scope of pro-life/feminist writings. Divided into two sections, Part One looks at the writings and speeches of early feminists (1790-1960) who opposed abortion. Part Two (1960-present) looks at how pro-life feminism carries on the life-affirming heritage of the first wave of feminism, which puts it in stark contrast to the feminist movement saturated in abortion advocacy that the media adore.

The book, while lengthy, is an enjoyable, productive read. Pro-Life Feminism: Yesterday and Today includes representative samples of writings from such well-known 19th-century feminists, such as Susan B. Anthony, and modern writers, such as columnist Nat Hentoff. This not only documents pro-life feminism but gives it deserved intellectual heft.

You can skip around or read the book in order—each “chapter” is a self-contained study of a particular person and her—or, occasionally, his—association with the feminist movement and the pro-life views of its many leaders. The rich history of early suffragists is recounted in this volume using the original writings.

While pro-life feminism embraces a broader range of issues than NRLC is involved in, the arguments it uses to oppose abortion will be familiar. The writers and leaders of the movement, even in its early years, came from a wide variety of backgrounds that include Jewish, Quaker, Catholic, doctors, nurses, post-abortive, Socialist, and ordained women.

Early feminists, of course, sought to bring women into a position of greater equality with men. While these 19th-century feminists believed that women had a right to control their own bodies, they passionately argued that the unborn, developing child was a separate being from his or her mother and that once that life had begun it was a horrible wrong to kill the child.

Many of the early pro-life feminists went on to personally help women facing crisis pregnancies. Examples included domestic help who'd been let go because of pregnancy or a pregnant woman left destitute because her husband had been killed in an accident in the factory. With the advent of the 20th century, factory work became the largest form of employment especially in the Northeast and Midwest. Many immigrant families found themselves shunned because of their ethnicity and none more so than the unmarried, pregnant immigrant.

Early feminists helped to open up some of the forerunners to today's crisis pregnancy centers. One of the earliest ones was Hull House, opened in 1888 by early pro-life feminist/suffragist Jane Addams and modeled after the famous Toynbee Hall settlement house in London. At Hull House, young women were encouraged to keep and care for their children, learn a profession if they didn't have skills, and live at Hull House until they could support themselves and their children.

Some modern pro-life authors and feminists write of seeking “common ground” with pro-abortion feminists, but others note that there is a lack of continuity in pro-abortion arguments. Faced with this inconsistency, pro-abortion feminists often stumble through rote arguments.

While many readers will not agree with every writer, past or present, I found it helpful to read about the pro-life struggles both by early pro-life feminists/suffragettes and modern feminists at odds with the National Organization for Women. I gained a better understanding of the fight against abortion—both historically and currently—from a different point of view.

Linda Naranjo-Huebl, one of the editors and an active leader of Feminists for Life, writes the conclusion to the volume and uses an old Scottish folktale to illustrate her point. Lachie MacLaughlin and his family (a wife and 10 children) would stand at their door every evening and welcome “passersby in for a bit of food and fellowship, each time declaring that there was always room for one more.” One evening, their home “burst at the seams” because of all of the people inside. “Everyone ‘wail[s] for a while in the heather’ until they decide to raise up a ‘bonny new house’” that will hold even more.

This story of hospitality and community effort is used to illustrate the pro-life movement. Naranjo-Huebl writes of the 50 or so young women who have shared her family’s home over the years.

Each young woman needed the help of the local crisis pregnancy center and, by extension, the open arms of a loving family. As she says, “may each of us, in our hearts, our homes, our communities, and our lives, always have room for one more.”