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# Biographical Reference Works for and about Women, from the Advent of the Women's Liberation Movement to the Present: An Exploratory Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Hundreds of English-language biographical reference books devoted to women subjects were published between 1966 and 2006. These works compensated for underrepresentation of women in standard sources and responded to the intense interest in women's lives on the part of feminist scholars. The findings in this article are derived from a bibliographic database that includes works limited by nationality, race, occupation, and other factors, as well as general biographical dictionaries. A decade-by-decade analysis reveals trends in subject content that parallel developments in the scholarly field of women's studies and the public arena. Problems with duplicative content, subjectivity, and factual errors are described, and points for evaluation are recommended. As biographical information about women is increasingly available on the open Web, questions remain about the nature and future of this type of information source.

## INTRODUCTION

For as long as books have been published, collective biographies have been in vogue. From the lives of the saints, to multivolume national biographical dictionaries, to gossipy works about movie stars—readers and researchers have many resources to satisfy their seemingly inexhaustible appetites for information about the lives of others.

### *Why Women's Biography Matters*

Biographical dictionaries are important materials in every library's general reference collection. According to a popular textbook on reference services, "one of the most consistent features of reference work has been

the high demand for information about people" (Fairchild and Bopp, 2001, p. 381). People, of course, come in two genders; yet prior to the advent of the women's movement, standard biographical sources slighted women. For example, the classic British resource, the *Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*, included 34,533 men and only 1,518 women, about four percent. In the supplementary *Missing Persons* volume, issued in 1994, the portion of women was twelve percent, or 130 of 1,086 entries (Fenwick, 1994), and this was hailed as a major improvement. American women fared no better in the *Dictionary of American Biography (DAB)*; in the original set and its first two supplements, there are 706 biographies of women and 14,164 of men—again, women are just over four percent of the total (Garraty, 1988).

Of course, when it comes to female biographical subjects, quantity is not the only issue. Quality of content is obviously also important. A historian, looking back on the *DAB*, ventures that "in general, the sketches of the women are no better or worse than those of men" (Garraty, 1988, p. 674) while he calls attention to the cursory treatment of certain luminaries (Louise May Alcott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Abigail Adams) and an occasional tendency to dwell on women's physical appearance, frail health, and domestic details. He laments that genealogical references are almost always to the male line of descent. In her extensive analysis of the female subjects and female contributors in the *DNB*, Fenwick (1994) discovers some women entered under husbands' names by which they were scarcely known in their own lifetimes, let alone by posterity. On the whole, women who were admitted to the pages of the *DNB* were not treated in as great a depth as their male counterparts. Among other examples, Fenwick points out that Jane Austen merited less than two pages, while Jonathan Swift was accorded twenty-three pages.

With the rise of the women's liberation movement (often called the "second wave" of American feminism) in the late 1960s, came a renewed interest in concise biographies of women, both living and deceased. This article looks at that prolific era. One should bear in mind, however, that earlier generations of "first wave" feminists likewise gathered biographical data on women into dictionary-style books. For example, *A Woman of the Century: Fourteen Hundred-seventy Biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading American Women in All Walks of Life* (Willard & Livermore, 1893) went through several editions and reprintings. The most recent reissue was in 2005 (Willard & Livermore, 2005). The compilers—temperance crusader and suffragist Frances Willard and journalist and social reformer Mary Livermore—declared in their preface that "the nineteenth century is [the] woman's century." With a nod to "all the cyclopaedias and books about famous women," they announced their intention to "supply a vacant niche in the reference library" and to enlighten readers: "Even to those best informed on this subject, we believe that a glance at these

pages will bring astonishment at the vast array of woman's achievements here chronicled, in hundreds of new vocations and avocations." They foreshadow the populist credo of the social historians of our own time, by stating that "this book is not alone a book of record of famous names, but one which aims to show what women have done in the humbler as well as in the higher walks of life" (Willard & Livermore, 1893, preface).

A century later, Willard and Livermore's sentiments are echoed by Barbara J. Love, editor of *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975* (2006), who explained her motivation for creating a biographical dictionary thus:

This book *had* to be written. The 2,220 biographies in this reference work must be available for anyone who wants to understand *why* the second wave women's movement succeeded so quickly and pervasively. More than any other social revolution in history, ours grew from the struggles of thousands of individuals to erase thousands of separate forms of discrimination in every sector of society. (p. xi)

In our own era, Love asserts, the United States has experienced another burst of progress by women, and learning about the lives of feminist leaders will inspire the next generation of activists:

It is my hope, and the hope of dozens of others who worked on this reference book, that young feminists today and in the future will know the contributions each of us made and that this knowledge will nurture them in the continuing struggle. (p. xv)

That biographies have an educational value is obvious. By presenting successful role models, they inspire readers and instruct them in strategies for overcoming life's obstacles. Moreover, the true stories of individual lives lend immediacy and interest to dull historical study. When we identify with the people of the past, we may better understand the times in which they lived and their relevance to our own times. Furthermore, biography has a particular role in advancing women's equality:

What better approach to understanding social injustice inflicted on women throughout the ages, than the biography of an exceptional woman, for to speak of a woman as exception because she did not fit into the stereotype is already to denounce the injustices of the stereotypes. (Gutiérrez, 1992, p. 54)

Feminist biography has two important consequences: it "allows us to see women as central *actors*, and from the perspective of their own lived experience"; and it "allows us to see gender as a historical construct" (Stuart, 1992, p. 62). Put another way, "feminist biographers in particular appreciate that the possibility of a viable future depends, at least in part, on securing a usable past" (Long, 1999, p. 104).

Present-day feminists have been especially drawn to autobiographical genres, including memoirs and life histories. The very act of writing one's life story can be empowering and affirming for women authors, and cer-

tainly reading about a woman's life in her own words is a moving and inspirational experience for an empathetic female reader. A number of popular books have reproduced the diaries or oral histories of "ordinary" women of the past whom standard historical studies ignore. Arguably the best example of this subgenre is *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (Ulrich, 1990), which won a Pulitzer Prize.

Scholarly studies of women's autobiographical writings are legion. To a lesser extent, feminist theorists and critics have examined and discussed biography, both as a literary genre and a liberationist strategy. Among the themes that feminist scholars grapple with are: the relationship of the biographer to her subject; the blurred boundaries between autobiography, biography, and fiction; the theoretical underpinnings of feminist biography; and the response of female readers to biographies of women (Barry, 1990; Cheigny, 1983; Heilbrun, 1988; Iles, 1992; Long, 1999; Stanley, 1992).

Nearly all recent scholarship on women's life-writing<sup>1</sup> is concerned with books, diaries, and other lengthy works that treat individual women. Alison Booth's research is a notable exception. Booth identified more than 930 English-language collective biographies of women (i.e., works in which three or more women's lives are treated in narrative form) published between 1830 and 1940. Faced with this sizeable corpus, she concluded that feminist historiographers are mistaken when they assert that women's history was invisible, forgotten or lost until our own era. Rather, "over the centuries, it seemed that a nation or community was hardly worth its salt without its lists of eminent women" (Booth, 2004, p. 3). She documents an uninterrupted tradition of chronicling women's lives, a tradition with several purposes: "The presenters of these group panegyrics assumed that assortments of female biographies served not only as sound evidence concerning women's nature and as reliable guides to feminine excellence but also as contributions to national history" (p. 3). She demonstrates that these popular biographical compendia offered a wider range of role models for women readers than did advice literature or novels during the same time span. Booth's study does not extend to works published after 1940.

Although there has always been an eager audience for collective biographies of women, there can be little doubt that the current rash of publishing in this area owes much to the rebirth of the feminist movement in the 1960s and to the development of women's studies as an academic field. Therefore, the writings of feminist literary scholars and feminist biographers provide necessary context, even if they seldom discuss the highly condensed, often formulaic entries in biographical dictionaries and similar works. Perhaps for this reason—to work with richer data—Booth focuses on collective biographies in narrative form rather than reference books. The study reported here, in contrast, is primarily concerned with biographical collections that were compiled and marketed

as reference tools. It also includes works that may not have been created solely for reference use, but which can nonetheless be consulted easily for facts about individual women.

### METHODOLOGY

A database was constructed of English-language biographical dictionaries and collective biographies devoted to women with imprint dates from 1966 through 2006. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded. While the onset of the second wave of feminism cannot be traced to a single date or event, the founding of NOW is acknowledged as a milestone that heralded the huge impact which the emerging women's liberation movement would have on gender relations in United States over the ensuing decades.<sup>2</sup> This forty-one-year span is sufficiently long to discern trends in topics and formats of biographical reference publishing and to glimpse the relationship of the reference works to trends in society and in the scholarly fields of women's studies and gender studies.

A number of sources were drawn upon to populate the database. The richest source was the researcher's own files of citations, advertisements, and reviews of women's studies reference works. In addition, authoritative bibliographies in women's studies were consulted (Krikos & Ingold, 2004; Loeb, Searing & Stineman, 1987; Searing, 1985; Stineman & Loeb, 1979). The semiannual issues of the comprehensive bibliography, *New Books on Women and Feminism*, which is published by the Women's Studies Librarian of the University of Wisconsin System, and the same office's newsletter, *Feminist Collections*, which features a regular column reviewing new reference books, furnished additional titles. Bibliographies of biographical resources yielded a few unique citations (Slocum, 1986; Wick & Mood, 1998). In addition, subject searches were conducted in the online catalog of the University of Illinois and in WorldCat. However, as the following discussion of issues in resource discovery will reveal, searching online library catalogs proved a frustrating way to identify collective biographies.

As references were gathered, it became necessary to establish parameters for inclusion in the database. The first vital question to resolve was: what distinguishes a biographical publication as a reference tool, rather than a work that is read cover-to-cover? The *Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science (ODLIS)* (Reitz, 2006) defines the term *biographical dictionary* as "a single-volume reference work or set of reference books containing biographical essays about the lives of actual people, sometimes limited to biographees who are deceased." The definition goes on to provide examples of such dictionaries that are general in scope, subject specific, or limited to persons of a specific nationality, race, field, profession, period or gender. By contrast, the term *collective biography* is defined as "a work in one or more volumes containing separate accounts of the lives of two or more individuals who lived within a specific time

period, distinguished themselves in the same field or activity, or have some other characteristic in common." In addition, "the essays in a collective biography are usually longer than the entries in a biographical dictionary and may include a biobibliography or list of references for further reading." The related term *biobibliography* refers to "a reference work combining biographical information with bibliography, either in the form of brief biographical entries with a list of works written by the biographees, sometimes in separate sections . . . or longer biographical essays with a list of works written by and about the biographee at the end of each entry." Another, more technical term, not found in *ODLIS*, is *prosopography*, which is a synonym for *collective biography* with the stress on "a group of lives with common background characteristics," such as being women (Winslow, 1995, p. 53). Booth (2004) favors the word *prosopography* and contributes yet another term to the discussion, *group biohistoriography*, which suggests the usefulness of collective biography as a means of writing history, in particular the history of women (p.12)

Works that fit any of the above definitions—biographical dictionaries, collective biographies, biobibliographies and prosopographies—were included in the database, if they were substantially biographical in nature and treated at least twenty women. The cutoff at twenty subjects is admittedly arbitrary. A work that bears the Library of Congress subject heading "Women authors, Caribbean—Biography—Dictionaries" was omitted because it profiled only a dozen writers. However, many more works that were not cataloged as biographical dictionaries did enter the database under the "twenty or more" rule; a fair number of these would likely be shelved in the circulating collections of libraries, rather than the noncirculating reference collections, although they might be useful in answering reference queries. In addition, to warrant inclusion a work had to either be organized alphabetically by name or have an easy-to-use alphabetical name index. This excluded some narrative histories of groups of women that carried the "Biography" subject heading subdivision in the library catalog.

While it was an objective of this study to be as exhaustive as possible in locating works, including those of limited regional and local interest, it was decided to exclude any works that were not held by at least twenty North American libraries according to WorldCat. Under this rule, only a few obscure foreign publications were excluded. The "twenty holdings" rule also weeded out some materials listed in WorldCat that can best be described as grey literature—short mimeographed works and the like. Within the 1966–2006 time period, several works appeared in new editions; others were supplemented by additional volumes. These were included in the database, since one objective was to chart interest in such works over time, and the issuance of new editions and supplements indicates a strong perceived market for the materials. For the same reason, assuming they met

all the other criteria, works with the subject heading subdivision "Juvenile literature" were included. However, a comprehensive search specifically for works aimed at young readers was not conducted. Only English-language works were included, but the content scope of many of them is international.

In the process of identifying titles for the database, several reference works surfaced that support identification and use of women's biographies, but are not themselves primary sources of information on individual women's lives. Some of these are discussed in the section on related works, but they are not part of the database. Similarly, many Web-based biographical sources came to light. Due to the vagaries of search engines and the inadequacies of metadata in many of the resources, Web sites were often discovered in a serendipitous manner. For this reason, they too are excluded from the database, but exemplary sites are noted in the conclusion to this article.

There are 437 records in the database. Of these, 55 are later editions or volumes of serials, such as *Who's Who of American Women*; thus the database contains 382 unique titles published during the four decades under consideration. It cannot be claimed that the database is comprehensive. In particular, the inclusion of publications that profile women at the state or local level is certainly partial. However, the size of the database is sufficient for the discovery of patterns and trends.

A year-by-year bibliography of works in the database can be found on the Web at <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/lxx/BiogRefWorksAboutWomen.htm>. Full citations for works mentioned in this article are available at the Web site. The author will periodically update the bibliography and would appreciate learning of additional titles for inclusion.

#### THE GROWTH OF THE LITERATURE OVER TIME

Four hundred and thirty-seven biographical reference books on women were identified in the forty-one-year span from 1966 through 2006, or an average of about ten per year. A year-by-year analysis reveals a pattern of growth in numbers throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century. That the emerging women's movement spurred the compilation of collective biographies of women seems evident. Between the first decade of second wave feminism, 1966–75, and the following decade, 1976–85, the number of such publications increased by 223 percent. Between 1976–85 and 1986–95, the rate of increase was 77.5 percent, while between 1986–95 and 1996–2005, the rate of increase dropped to 34.9 percent.

Although the absolute numbers of biographical sources published each decade grew (see Figure 1), the falling rate of increase suggests that the market was becoming saturated. The latter half of the 1990s was the most bountiful period for such publications; 104 were identified with imprint dates from 1996 through 2000. Analyzing the data more granularly

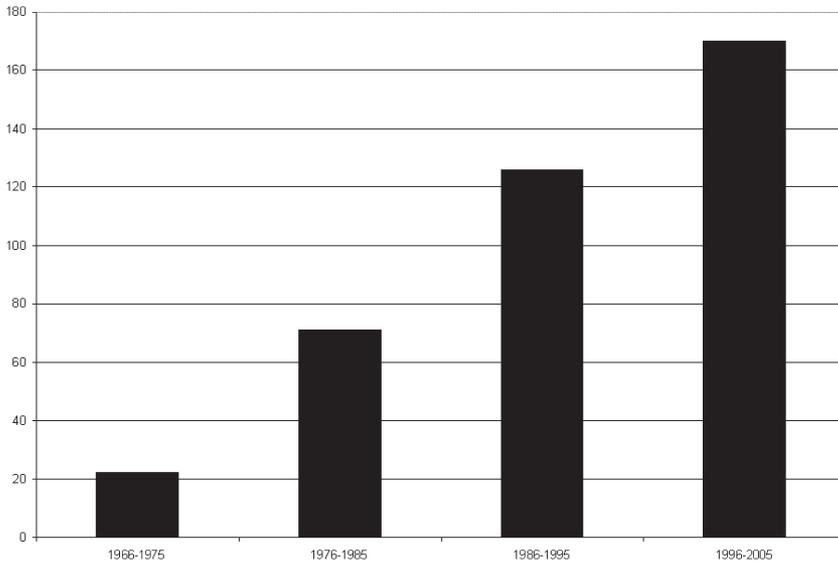


Figure 1. Biographical Reference Works on Women by Decade

by half-decade reveals that publication numbers began to drop in the new millennium (see Figure 2).

As noted earlier, 55 of the 426 works in the database, about 13 percent, are later editions of monographic titles or volumes in serial titles. Twenty-two of these are updates of *Who's Who of American Women*, which has been issued biennially by Marquis Who's Who since 1958/59. Another frequently revised title is *First Ladies of the United States of America*, a publication of the White House Historical Association, which has been through eleven editions since its first edition in 1975.

General works are more likely than specialized ones to be revised. The *International Who's Who of Women* has had three editions: the first in 1992, the second in 1997, and the third in 2003. Jennifer Uglow's international and transhistorical biographical dictionary of women is now in its fourth edition. Each edition carried a different title identifying its publisher: *The Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography* (1982); *The Continuum Dictionary of Women's Biography* (1989); *The Northeastern Dictionary of Women's Biography* (1999); and *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography* (2005).

Although supplements are less common than new editions, several works have been complemented by additional volumes. The best known of these is the three-volume *Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, a highly praised, authoritative source published by the Harvard University Press in 1971. In 1980, *Notable American Women:*

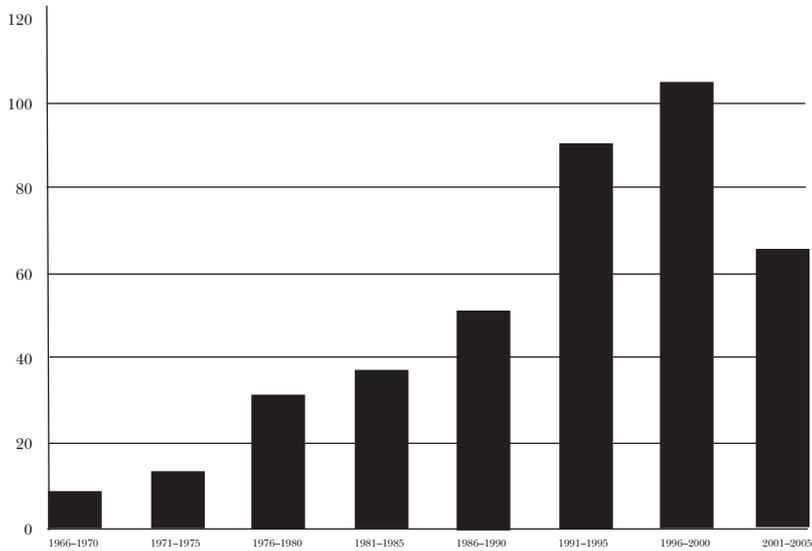


Figure 2. Biographical Reference Works on Women by Half-Decade

*The Modern Period* appeared, covering women who died between 1950 and 1975. The latest supplement was issued in 2004—*Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary Completing the Twentieth Century*. As one of the earliest entries in the flood of post-1966 biographical resources on women, *Notable American Women* set the standard for excellence in the genre; it is comprised of definitive articles signed by scholars, each accompanied by references to key publications and archives.

While biographical dictionaries with global scope or highly respected content continue to be revised and supplemented, the vast majority of the titles identified during this study are onetime publications. If they are not brought up to date or superseded by later works, such tools diminish in usefulness. For example, many state and local collective biographies of women were produced in a burst of feminist enthusiasm in the 1970s; prominent women who are now in their 30s and 40s are not represented in their pages.

## TRENDS IN SUBJECT CONTENT

### *Occupations and fields of activity*

General works—that is, works that are not restricted to women of a particular occupation or social group, although they may be limited to a single country—are the most common type of collective female biography. They constitute nearly thirty percent of the unique titles in the database. More

than two-thirds of the works do limit their content by the women's race, ethnicity, occupation, or other field of activity. The group most often profiled in these specialized sources is writers.

Fully 18 percent of the unique titles in the database are devoted to women writers, including authors of fiction, poetry, drama, and subgenres such as mysteries and romances. Many of these are not purely works of biography, but rather works that might be categorized as biobibliographical or bio-critical. Typically, a brief outline or narrative of the author's life is followed by a longer discussion of the themes in her work and its critical reception. The author's major publications are almost always listed, and frequently citations to critical studies and reviews are appended to the entry. Literary biographical compendia usually focus on particular nationalities or languages, following the traditional approach to literary studies. The earliest literary biographical guide in the database is a multivolume set, *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*; its first volume appeared in 1979. Generally speaking, however, biographical dictionaries of women authors did not flourish until the late 1980s.

It is not unusual for a collective biography of women writers to be limited on several factors, including combinations of nationality, language, period, genre, and race or ethnicity. Examples include: *A Biographical Dictionary of English Women Writers, 1580–1720*; *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers, 1900–1945*; and *An Encyclopedia of German Women Writers, 1900–1933*. Much rarer are all-encompassing works, such as *Great Women Writers: The Lives and Works of 135 of the World's Most Important Women Writers, from Antiquity to the Present*.

After writers, the careers and avocations most often treated in specialized biographical dictionaries are, in descending order:

- the wives of American presidents and governors (18)
- composers and others involved with music (17)
- scientists (17)
- visual artists (15)
- women in politics and public office (15)
- actresses and entertainers (13)
- athletes (13)
- businesswomen (8)
- filmmakers (8)
- women in the military (7)
- feminists (7)
- women in medical professions (5)
- explorers (4).

The numbers in parentheses are the number of records in the database for works on each occupational category. Because, as noted above, the

database cannot be claimed to be comprehensive, these numbers are best understood as a relative measure of the attention paid to some fields of activity compared to others. All other categories of activity have three or fewer biographical reference sources devoted to them present in the database: anthropologists, mathematicians, social reformers, spies, women in communications, criminals, economists, educators, lawyers, mothers, Nobel Prize winners, orators, psychologists, aviators, historians, specialists in international relations, librarians, medievalists, philosophers, and sociologists.

Occupations missing from the lists above—for example, women in the labor movement and ecological activists—are untreated thus far in biographical reference sources. The time is also ripe for a biographical dictionary of the women, engaged in many different disciplines, who founded and nurtured the successful new academic field of women's studies. Many influential members of this first generation of feminist scholars have retired or died already.

As the following section illustrates, various themes caught the attention of compilers, publishers, and readers at different times. To a certain extent, these "fashions" in biographical coverage echoed developments in feminist scholarship and also responded to issues raised by activists in the wider women's movement.

#### *Trends in Content by Decade*

*1966–1975* Not surprisingly, the majority of the works in the first decade under review, 1966–75, were general in nature. Typical titles include *Two Thousand Women of Achievement* and *Generations of Denial: 75 Short Biographies of Women in History*. Such works spotlight women across multiple fields of activity, celebrating the myriad ways in which women have contributed to society and culture. Whether explicitly stated in a preface or not, the goal of the compilers is evidently to showcase the extraordinary reach of women's influence. When fame is the primary criterion for selection, such general works may include women who are notorious for bad behavior, including criminals, as well as worthy role models.

During the 1966–75 decade, some specialized sources were produced as well. The most common limitation on coverage was national. Examples include *Outstanding Young Women of America*, *One Hundred American Women of Achievement*, and *Famous American Women*, along with the much-lauded first volumes of *Notable American Women*. Substantial state-level volumes began to appear also, such as the self-published *West Virginia Women* by Jim F. Comstock and *Daughters of Dakota*, a 440-page collection of profiles that was issued as a number of the South Dakota State Historical Society's journal, *Report and Historical Collections*. While limited geographically, these types of publications usually include women from all walks of life.

Specialized volumes devoted to a single arena of activity were scarce in the early years of this study, but a few did make their way into print.

The subjects treated included artists, women in espionage, and women in the broadly defined field of communications (broadcasting, publishing, advertising, public relations, and allied professions). Two separate works, both from major publishers, profiled women in Congress.

Because the database is restricted to English-language works, books from the United States and Great Britain predominate throughout it. It bears mention that similar efforts to recover women's lives were underway in other countries and likewise resulted in many foreign-language publications similar to those discussed here. The contemporary feminist movement is a global phenomenon.

*1976–1985* While general volumes continued to appear, many more specialized biographical dictionaries of women were published in the decade from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties. The nation's bicentennial may have spurred interest in women's political role; the year 1976 saw the publication of two resources—an official guide to *Women in Congress, 1917–1976*, issued by the federal government, and *Women in Public Office: A Biographical Dictionary and Statistical Analysis*, from the recently founded Center for the American Woman and Politics at Princeton University. Four years later, *American Political Women: Contemporary and Historical Profiles* appeared. Women in governmental and party positions were (and continue to be) well represented in general sources.

Interest in women's contribution to music blossomed in this decade, judging by the proliferation of biographical reference works. In 1978 two pathbreaking resources were published—*Women Composers: A Handbook* and *Women of Notes: 1,000 Women Composers Born Before 1900*. Four more biographical sourcebooks on female composers and musicians followed in 1980 and 1981 and another in 1984. Interest in women composers and performers of music continued in subsequent years. Biographical dictionaries on the whole focused on women in classical and art music traditions, rather than the emerging women's music scene popularized by the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (founded in 1976) and similar gatherings.

The rediscovery of women's activity in the visual arts also resulted in important biographical tools in this decade, including: *The International Dictionary of Women Workers in the Decorative Arts*; *American Women Artists: From Early Indian Times to the Present*; and the *Dictionary of Women Artists: An International Dictionary of Women Artists Born Before 1900*. Perhaps informed by these and other compensatory works in art history, women artists in New York City founded the Guerrilla Girls movement in 1985 to protest sexism in museum collections and exhibits.

The first work devoted to women in science was published in 1985: *Women in the Scientific Search: An American Bio-bibliography, 1724–1979*. The same year a ground-breaking volume of biographies of women athletes was published by World Almanac. Coming thirteen years after the pas-

sage of Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendments to the Civil Rights Act, this work was overdue. The full blossoming of biographical reference works on women in sports would not occur until the 1990s.

Works on women and religion also began to be published in this period. The majority of these titles focused on a single faith, and were published by denominational presses, and this is still true today. The interest in female religious practitioners is not limited to Christianity; several works cover Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist women.

*1986–1995* Trends in content that emerged between 1976 and 1985 continued into the next decade. In this decade, the first biographical reference works on women in world politics appeared. Biographies of women artists continued to be compiled, emphasizing women in the United States. Two separate books on American women sculptors were published, as well as the *Biographical Dictionary of Women Artists in Europe and America since 1850* and *North American Women Artists of the Twentieth Century: A Biographical Dictionary*.

Works devoted to women in science and mathematics multiplied. Two were published in 1986 alone—*Women Scientists from Antiquity to the Present: An Index*; and *Women in Science: Antiquity through the Nineteenth Century: A Biographical Dictionary with Annotated Bibliography*. This parallels the publication of several ground-breaking monographs on women and science in the mid-1980s by leading scholars such as Evelyn Fox Keller, Ruth Bleier, and Anne Fausto-Sterling.

English-language biographical reference sources on women writers during this period expanded to treat the literary history of several non-English-speaking countries, including Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Russia, Italy, and Japan. Other multinational reference volumes covered Continental women writers and writers in Latin America. The first biographical sourcebook on lesbian writers and two on African American women writers were published between 1988 and 1993. Women writing in the popular genres of mystery and science fiction were accorded their own reference works, as were dramatists.

Meanwhile, a new generation of social historians criticized the “great woman” approach to the past. They insisted that by examining the lives of ordinary, nonelite women, one can most clearly understand the opportunities and restrictions experienced by most women. Two publications apparently responded to this scholarly direction. *Lesser-Known Women: A Biographical Dictionary* and *The Book of Women: 300 Notable Women History Passed By* suggest, by their very titles, that it is useful to look beyond the obvious heroines for inspiration and historical information.

*1996–2005* During the last full decade represented in the database, general works continued to flow from major publishing houses. Examples included *The Larousse Dictionary of Women*, *Webster’s Dictionary of American*

*Women*, and the *Penguin Biographical Dictionary of Women*. A major set, *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, established a new standard for comprehensiveness when its first volumes appeared in 1999. Complete in seventeen volumes (the final index volume was issued in 2002), it cost an astonishing \$1,750—proof of the value that women’s biographical information has acquired in a library’s reference collection. The set won the American Library Association’s prestigious Dartmouth Medal for the year’s outstanding reference book in 2001.

The specialized sources in this prolific period run the gamut from the usual biographical surveys of authors of various nationalities and periods, to first-of-their-kind volumes on coaches, entrepreneurs, actresses in horror films, historians, blues singers, lawyers, baseball players, economists, aviators, and astronauts. The first biographical dictionary of the women’s liberation movement, *Significant Contemporary American Feminists*, was issued in 1999. At the same time, some works reached farther back in history, to profile ancient Greek and Roman women and women of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

The number of reference works on women scientists mushroomed in this decade. Among them were specialized volumes on women in the life sciences, physical sciences, chemistry, and physics. Although the seeds of Women’s Studies were planted in literature, history, and the arts, by the late 1990s the hard sciences as well as the social sciences were infused with feminist scholarship, and the search for intellectual “foremothers” was ongoing in nearly every discipline.

Women in the visual arts continued to be profiled in new sources. Surprisingly, these did not distinguish artists working in different media. Rather, works such as the *Dictionary of Women Artists* (and its subsequent abridgement, the *Concise Dictionary of Women Artists*), *Contemporary Women Artists*, and *A to Z of American Women in the Visual Arts* complemented or superseded earlier comprehensive sources.

Not every work published during this period presented positive role models. Although words like “distinguished,” “notable,” and “influential” can be found in many of the titles, scattered among the lofty compilations are books like *Swingin’ Chicks of the ‘60s: A Tribute to 101 of the Decade’s Defining Women*, and *Daytime Divas: The Dish on Dozens of Daytime TV’s Great Ladies*, and *Mistresses of Mayhem: The Book of Women Criminals*. Clearly appropriate for public libraries, such books may also support popular culture studies in academe.

*2006–2007* It is too early to identify trends in the second half of the 2000s. The subjects of recent biographical reference works range from vaudeville performers to women in ancient China. It does appear that publishing in this area is waning, perhaps because the market is temporarily saturated. As the volumes currently on library shelves become outdated, especially in their coverage of women still living, we may see a resurgence

of the sub-genre. On the other hand, the increasing availability of Web sites offering biographical information may be effecting a permanent reduction in the number of print biographical dictionaries on the market.

*Women of Color and Other Minorities*

Just before the period surveyed in this article, the first volume of *Profiles of Negro Womanhood* was published in 1964. A second volume appeared in 1966. More than a decade passed before the next identified work on African American women, *Black Women, Makers of History: A Portrait*, was published in 1977. A year later, a book titled *Written Out of History* offered the collected life stories of Jewish women.

The appearance of biographical reference sources on women of color and other minority women paralleled the increasing attention paid to nonmajority women in the developing curricula of women's studies programs. The publication of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Hull, Bells-Scott, & Smith, 1982), the first textbook devoted to African American women's studies, galvanized attention to minority women's experiences within the community of feminist scholars. A two-volume biographical sourcebook, *Contributions of Black Women to America*, was published the same year. No doubt publishers were eager to produce books with a dual appeal to both women's studies and ethnic studies researchers.

The 1990s saw the fullest flowering of biographical reference publishing on African American women. One author, librarian Jessie Carney Smith, was responsible for much of the best material in this area. She edited the groundbreaking *Notable Black American Women* in 1992; a second volume followed in 1996 and a third in 2002. Entries from this series were selected and abridged for two additional works: *Epic Lives: One Hundred Black Women Who Made a Difference* (1993) and *Powerful Black Women* (1996). Smith also edited two editions of *Notable Black American Men*.

Biographical information on women from many walks of life is also available in Dorothy Salem's *African American Women: A Biographical Dictionary* and Darlene Clark Hine's *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, both published in 1993. African American women have been the subjects of specialized biographical dictionaries as well, including *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras*; *Black American Women in Olympic Track and Field: A Complete Illustrated Reference*; and *African and African American Women of Science*.

Other racial and ethnic subgroups of women have not been covered nearly as extensively by biographical reference works as have African Americans. *Native American Women: A Biographical Dictionary* appeared in 1993, with a second edition in 2001. *A to Z of Native American Women* appeared in 1996. *Notable Hispanic American Women* came out in 1993, closely followed by a more selective work by the same authors, *Latinas! Women of Achievement*, in

1996. To date, only general sources on Native American women and Latinas are available, despite a growing body of scholarship on their specific contributions as writers, political reformers, and the like. No biographical dictionaries, general or specialized, of Asian American women have been identified. A single volume, *European Immigrant Women in the United States: A Biographical Dictionary*, provides sketches of white women from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds. Although the search strategies used to build the database did not uncover them, additional collections of women's biographies may exist for the more populous white American ethnic groups, such as Polish Americans or Italian Americans, perhaps published by ethnic historical societies or small specialized presses.

Lesbian women were among the earliest minority group to be profiled in their own volume. *Lesbian Lives: Biographies of Women from "The Ladder,"* was issued by a small women's press in 1976. It compiled profiles that had previously appeared in the pioneering lesbian magazine, *The Ladder*. Since that time, lesbians have been included in general biographical dictionaries of women; occasionally they are identifiable through a subject index, but generally not. Several publications, such as *Gay & Lesbian Biography* and *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History* combine coverage of gay men and lesbians.

#### EVALUATING BIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCE SOURCES ABOUT WOMEN

Reference book publishing is a lucrative business, especially for publishers that specialize in the genre, since libraries are a steady consumer base. Librarians have always grappled with issues of quality in reference materials. To judge the accuracy and potential usefulness of biographical works, library selectors ask several questions:

- Who is included in the work, and what are the criteria for inclusion? While a work's scope is frequently signaled in the wording of its title or subtitle, there may be additional selection parameters that are spelled out in a preface or introduction. In other cases, only a careful examination of a work with an inclusive-sounding title will reveal, for example, that nearly all the biographees hail from the United States.
- Given the work's scope, is it comprehensive? Volumes with titles like *100 Greatest Women in Sports* trumpet their selectivity. When a work implicitly claims to cover a field, one must search its pages to determine if important women have been left out.
- Are the biographical facts accurate? Some sources (though few in this study) obtain information directly from the biographees, usually via questionnaires. Most others rely on secondary sources, such as lengthier biographies, obituaries, magazine profiles, and the like. Signed entries are often considered more credible; a list of contributors with

- solid academic credentials also inspires confidence in the factual accuracy of a volume.
- Is the information current? Whether a work includes the latest developments in the lives of persons still living depends on how recently it was compiled. Even works that are limited to deceased subjects may require updating; this is particularly true for famous women, such as Susan B. Anthony or Eleanor Roosevelt, about whom feminist biographers have uncovered new facts and posited new interpretations of their lives.
  - Do the entries include references to published works by and/or about the woman? Do they point to archival collections? These features increase the scholarly value of a biographical reference source.
  - At what audience is the work aimed—general adult readers, students, children, or specialists in a field?
  - How detailed is the information provided? For some queries posed at the reference desk, very brief entries with birth and death dates and a summary of major activities for which the woman is known will suffice. Feminist biographers, however, stress the importance of telling a woman's whole life, including aspects of her private and family life that inform her public activities (Alpern, Antler, Perry, & Scobie, 1992).
  - If the usual alphabetic name arrangement is employed, have indexes been provided to aid in identifying women by vocation, race, ethnicity, religion, time period, birthplace, or other characteristics?

### *Problems*

*Duplicative Content* A persistent problem discovered in this overview is the reissuing of the same work by different publishers, sometimes under different titles. For example, *A to Z of American Women Writers* was published in hardcover by Facts on File in 2000 and republished in paperback with the title *American Women Writers: A Biographical Dictionary* by Checkmark in 2001. The same photographs were used in both cover designs. Slightly different is the case of the *Chambers Biographical Dictionary of Women*, published in Edinburgh in 1996. When it crossed the Atlantic to New York City, it became the *Larousse Dictionary of Women*. Similarly, *The 100 Most Influential Women of All Time*, published in New York, and *The 100 Greatest Women of All Time*, published in Oxford, England, both appear to be identical revisions of *The Giant Book of Influential Women*, which was published in Sydney, Australia. Libraries must be alert to such instances of outright duplication of content, to avoid wasting money on a book already owned.

Less straightforward are cases where the same material is reworked or reused in a new publication. Abridgements are rare but some do exist. Fortunately, it is easy to discern the relationship between the *Dictionary of Women Artists* and the *Concise Dictionary of Women Artists*. In other cases, title changes may obscure the relationships. As noted above, *Epic Lives*

offers selected and abridged entries from *Notable Black American Women*. The derivative work might be appropriate for school libraries or simply for libraries that cannot afford the original volume. Librarians might opt to own both, housing the original, more comprehensive work in the non-circulating reference collection and making the smaller derivative work available for borrowing.

*Vanity publications* Librarians must distinguish reputable and authoritative biographical dictionaries, in which the treatments can be trusted to be accurate and thorough, from so-called "vanity publications." Inclusion in the latter is typically contingent on the submission of data by the biographee together with prepayment for a copy of the volume. Even if payment is not required for inclusion, there is seldom any checking of the facts or screening of the entrants. Everyone who returns a questionnaire is included. Works of this nature include *Two Thousand Women of Achievement*, in which one searches unsuccessfully for famous names among the detailed entries.

While vanity publications are suspect because the data in them may not be objective, the fact remains that they cover many women who would not otherwise be listed in a reference book. Future historians may mine such publications for information about "ordinary" women. The listings are typically dominated by middle-class women who have achieved success in the professional or business worlds but have not blazed trails or risen to the very top of their fields. In the aggregate, the lives of such women tell us much about the society of their time.

It should be stressed that not all sources that rely on data submitted by the biographees themselves are vanity publications. Reputable sources such as *Who's Who of American Women* rely on questionnaires to gather information. The critical reader will try to ascertain how the editors selected the women who received their survey, and whether any further winnowing was done after the questionnaires were returned.

*Factual Errors and Omissions* The present study did not attempt to evaluate the works in the database for accuracy. However, reviewers occasionally noted errors, including incorrect dates, misspelled names, and misplaced emphases. In the highly abbreviated entries of a biographical dictionary, only the most salient facts can be presented, and what is considered important varies with the author or editor. Some entries on tennis champion Martina Navratilova, for instance, omit her lesbianism, a characteristic she has proudly acknowledged. Even though her sexuality had an impact on her career and her earnings from endorsements, and even though she is honored as a heroine and role model for young lesbians, her accomplishments on the court may be deemed the only important facts to include in a very brief biography.

The motives behind a compilation of biographies help to determine what information is included and what is not. If the goal is to inspire,

women whose actions are deemed criminal, trivial, or unhelpful in furthering women's equality may be excluded. Comparing today's biographical reference tools to those of a century ago, one notices a distinct lessening of entries for women whose major contribution was bearing and raising a male who became famous—or marrying one. Jennifer Uglow, in her foreword to the first edition of her dictionary of women's biography, notes that her choices adhere to the traditional measure of success, that is, public recognition. She recounts:

I came to realize that far from presenting a book which was representative of women's experience, I was compiling a book of deviants— independent, odd, often difficult women who had defied the expectations of their society as to what a woman's role should be. (Uglow & Hinton, 1982, p. viii)

Though many of these “deviant” women were mothers, wives, daughters, and friends in addition to pioneers in their chosen fields, their domestic lives tend to be overlooked in brief biographical treatments.

*Issues in Resource Discovery* As noted earlier, although the database on which this article is based includes 437 publications, it is undoubtedly not comprehensive. Subject searches in the University of Illinois online catalog and in OCLC's WorldCat were hampered by the nature of Library of Congress subject headings and their application. The precoordinated heading “Women—Biography—Dictionaries” was useful only for identifying general works. Combining the subject keywords “women” and “biography” and “dictionaries” in a search statement retrieved additional specialized works that have been cataloged under headings such as “Women artists—Biography—Dictionaries.” However, the subject keyword approach also retrieved a few works that fell outside the scope of this article, such as *The Norton Book of Women's Lives* (Rose, 1993), an anthology of extracts from autobiographies and diaries. The combined subject words “Women” and “Bio-bibliography” proved most useful for identifying reference works on women writers and composers.

Unfortunately, many relevant reference works do not carry the subject subdivisions “Dictionaries” or “Bio-bibliography.” Instead, they were cataloged simply under “Women—Biography” or parallel specialized terms, such as “Women authors—Biography” or “African American women—Biography.” These same terms are applied to biographies of individual women, especially biographies for young readers, which number in the thousands.

Despite these drawbacks, subject searching in the online catalogs was a necessary complement to searching by keywords in titles. Books written for a popular readership tended to carry less informative titles, such as *Love's Leading Ladies* (biographies of romance authors) or *Reel Women* (subtitle: *Pioneers of the Cinema, 1896 to the Present*). Title keyword searching

is also inconclusive because many books that are purely biographical have titles with the label "Encyclopedia" or "Historical Dictionary" rather than any indication that they consist solely of entries on individual women.

Finally, unearthing concise biographical data on women is complicated by the blurring of reference book genres. A great many reference works on women are primarily, but not exclusively, biographical in nature. For example, many so-called encyclopedias are primarily composed of entries about individuals, with a few topical essays interspersed. Among the numerous examples are: the *Encyclopedia of Amazons: Women Warriors from Antiquity to the Modern Era*; *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*; and *The Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers*.

### RELATED WORKS

Biographical dictionaries and collective biographies are not the only reference sources that aid investigations of women's lives. Other useful sources include bibliographies of women's biographies, autobiographies, and published diaries, as well as guides to archival collections of women's papers. Another category consists of indexes to women in mainstream biographical sources. In 1984, for example, the Marquis firm published a *Directory of Women in Marquis Who's Who Publications*, which, in addition to listing all the entries in the most recent edition of *Who's Who of American Women*, identified the women included in eight other current Marquis volumes, including *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, four regional U.S. publications, and publications devoted to law and to finance and industry. Apparently this index did not sell well, as no further volumes were issued.

An early effort by Norma O. Ireland, *Index to Women of the World from Ancient to Modern Times* (1970) was supplemented by another volume in 1988 and by a subject index compiled by Katherine Phenix in 1996. Other indexes to biographical information included specialized sources on women in music, novelists, Victorian women, and Islamic women. While today's researchers have little patience for using such tertiary sources, they remain invaluable keys for unlocking information in older collective biographies.

Most recently, two women who are frequently the subjects of biographies have been accorded entire reference books of their own: *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*; and *Queen Victoria: A Biographical Companion*. Perhaps exhaustive treatments like these are the next hot trend in biographical reference publishing about women.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has looked broadly at the patterns and trends in more than four hundred printed biographical reference works on women. The data analyzed consisted largely of bibliographic records. A deeper analysis of

the actual contents of these works might answer questions about their individual quality, comparative accuracy and completeness, and variety of formats (page layouts, presence of illustrations, kinds of indexes, and so on). Content analysis could incorporate the quantitative questions: How frequently are particular women or types of women included? How long are typical entries? What attributes are most often highlighted? And qualitative ones: How do the descriptions of women differ among the sources? What do editorial introductions reveal about the perceived need for women's biographical collections and the process of their creation?

By citing many examples, this study has conveyed the breadth and variety of collective biographies of women. However, a thorough analysis of the gaps in the literature remains to be done. A cursory review of the titles in the database suggests, for instance, that English-language biographical reference works on women in Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central America are still scarce. Why is that so? Is there an insufficient market for biographical dictionaries that profile women from these parts of the world? Or are they adequately represented in the sources that offer international coverage? Similar questions might be asked about unrepresented occupations and areas of activity. The answers would be of interest to scholars, biographers and publishers. As a starting point, standard bibliographies and encyclopedias in women's studies could be compared to the corpus of women's biographical dictionaries to pinpoint areas of scholarly interest where biographical resources are scant.

Some biographical dictionaries of women have gone through several editions. What changes have been made, and what can those revisions tell us about the evolving nature of gender-focused scholarship? What makes *Notable American Women* and *Women in World History* such well-respected works? Could best practices for compiling female biographical dictionaries be outlined, based on these and other works deemed of the highest quality by reviewers?

How do different biographical reference works treat the same woman? How have summary biographies of long-dead heroines, such as Joan of Arc or Marie Antoinette, changed over time? And how do different biographical reference works, especially those that are transhistorical and global in scope, vary in their selection of women for inclusion? As Uglow notes, "there can be no such thing as an 'objective' biographical dictionary of women" because "there is no accepted criteria of excellence implicit in the category [of women] itself" (Uglow & Hinton, 1982, p. vii). What subjective values are present in the choices of who to include and exclude?

While the major respected trade publishers have been very active in this field, many of the more specialized titles have been released by small women's, ethnic, religious, or regional presses. University presses have also produced collective biographies of women. Further research on the pub-

lishers might illuminate patterns in the perceived market for tools of this sort. Has the wording in publishers' catalogs and advertisements changed over time to appeal to shifting priorities in research and teaching?

This study represents the first fruits of a larger project to survey reference publishing for and about women in all fields from the advent of the women's liberation movement to the present. Additional questions arise when one considers the full universe of reference works for and about women. Does the ebb and flow of specialized topics in encyclopedias, chronologies, and bibliographies follow the patterns seen here in biographical sources? Are there discernable trends in which reference sources about women migrate to e-format?

Finally, this study did not address what may be the most interesting and important element, the users of biographical information and hence of these tools. Librarians value collective biographies as ready reference sources and judge them on their ability to answer factual questions that arise about women's lives. Yet there is some evidence, in the introductions and prefaces to the works themselves and also in reviews, that compilers and reviewers approach them differently, as texts to be read, sampled, and enjoyed. No user studies of these works have been published, but such research may become more feasible in the online environment, where usage statistics can be gathered automatically and users can be routed to feedback forms.

## CONCLUSION

As Figure 2 showed, biographical reference publishing about women peaked before the end of the twentieth century and now appears to be flagging. Is this a sign that the market is saturated and will rebound when the volumes now filling library shelves become outdated? Or is it a consequence of the unprecedented ease of finding biographical information on the Web? Many contemporary women maintain their own Web sites, and, in the case of writers and performers, additional Web sites have been created by fans and scholars. Much can be gleaned about academics from their curriculum vitae, which are increasingly accessible on university Web sites. Many other women maintain blogs, FaceBook profiles, and other self-revealing sites.

In addition, a number of Web sites assemble biographical data on women or provide links to other locations where it can be found. Among the more comprehensive sites are:

*Distinguished Women of Past and Present*

<http://www.distinguishedwomen.com/>

*The National Women's Hall of Fame* (American women)

<http://www.greatwomen.org/women.php>

*Women's History Month: Biographies of Notable Women*

<http://www.factmonster.com/spot/womenhistbios.html>

*300 Women Who Changed the World*

<http://www.britannica.com/women>

*Women's Biography Sites*

<http://home.earthlink.net/~sharynh/womensbiography.htm>

*Biographies of Notable Women*

[http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/blbio\\_list.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/blbio_list.htm)

Specialized sites on the Web also abound; many are not of high quality or are irregularly maintained. A few states have established virtual "halls of fame" for women, and these tend to be well researched and presented. The sites for Michigan (<http://hall.michiganwomenshalloffame.org/>) and Connecticut (<http://www.cwhf.org>) are excellent models. In addition, the following specialized sites are worth visiting:

*Voices from the Gaps: Artists Biographies (women of color)*

<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/VG/Bios/>

*Women in Congress: Congresswomen's Biographies*

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/congresswomen/index.asp>

*A Celebration of Women Writers*

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/>

*Biographies: First Ladies of the United States*

<http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/>

It is reasonable to expect that free Web sites devoted to women's biography will continue to flourish. It is also probable that many of the printed biographical dictionaries now in use will have future electronic editions or will be superseded by new works with similar coverage in electronic format. Assuredly, interest in the lives of women will not wane, and each generation will bring its own perspectives and needs to writing and compiling of brief biographies. Meanwhile, librarians and information seekers will continue to reap the bountiful harvest of reference tools sparked by the feminist movement since 1966.

## NOTES

1. *Life-writing* is an umbrella term that encompasses the genres of biography, autobiography, memoir, oral history, and the written or transcribed life histories gathered by social scientists.
2. Another event frequently used to mark the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement is the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.

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