



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Grant, P. (2020). Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World: Between Self and Other (Book review). *American Historical Review*, 125(2), pp. 721-722. doi: 10.1093/ahr/rhaa176

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/23729/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhaa176>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

publications@city.ac.uk

EVE COLPUS. *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World: Between Self and Other*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. xiii, 291. Cloth \$114.00.

The literature of the history of philanthropy in Britain is significantly less copious than that of the United States. Some reasons that might be suggested for this discrepancy are that, in the UK, philanthropy is not of the same scale and has never achieved the status it has in the United States. In Britain in the twentieth century, philanthropy, with some notable exceptions, has not been accepted as a significant area of study, being entirely eclipsed by a concentration on the development, and decline, of the welfare state. Thus we have no general history of British philanthropy since David Owen's *English Philanthropy, 1669–1960*, published in 1964—and Owen, incidentally, was American. Fortunately a new generation of young scholars is now beginning to rectify this omission and is bringing fresh and innovative perspectives to both the history of philanthropy itself and its relationship with the wider world. With *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World: Between Self and Other*, her first book, Eve Colpus takes a prominent position among them.

If there is one philanthropic topic that disproves my initial proposition, it is that of female philanthropy, especially as practiced by middle- and upper-class women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But even if this literature is more extensive, the key works of its most prominent authors (for example Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-century England* [1980], and Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* [1991]) are now well over twenty years old. The tendency of these previous authors has been to suggest that women's involvement in philanthropy can be explained by their "feminine" attributes, the provision of care and the emotional or moral concerns deemed appropriate for elite women of the time. This interpretation is contrasted with the far greater instrumentality of men's philanthropy, which is predominantly related to

economic and political factors. As Colpus suggests, the “Lady Bountiful” image of the female philanthropist “still haunts scholarship and popular parlance about women’s philanthropic practice” (15). One of Colpus’s key objectives is to correct this male-centered interpretation of history, and in this task her book is a significant achievement.

Colpus selects for her study four women: Evangeline Booth (daughter of the founder of the Salvation Army and herself general of the Salvation Army from 1934 to 1939); Lettice Fisher (founder of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, now known as Gingerbread); Emily Kinnaird (Indian missionary, friend of Mahatma Gandhi, and daughter of the founder of the YWCA, whose worldwide growth Kinnaird championed); and Muriel Paget (notable for her humanitarian work in Eastern and Central Europe and her friendship with the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk). Though all four were British, their ideas and work practices transcended international boundaries and rearticulated “national difference and the valuation of interracial reciprocity” (6). Here Colpus immediately identifies crucial differences in the concept of philanthropy from many of the women’s male contemporaries. But the book is by no means a conventional biography; indeed, I would suggest that one strength is that it suggests a more fruitful, thematic approach to the “collective biography” that gets beneath the surface of its subjects. Colpus concentrates not upon the experiences of the women but on their ideas and the wider issues of female philanthropy’s critique of twentieth-century modernity, including the crucial role of language in the construction of her subjects’ meaning of philanthropic service. In doing so Colpus demonstrates convincingly how the women’s philanthropic practice was a response to the modern world, a proactive reshaping of relationships and not a passive reaction, as many previous scholars have implied. The book is therefore structured around five thematic chapters (“Relationships,” “Knowledge,” “Identity,” “Culture,” and “Communication”) that

develop the four women's approaches and ideas rather than treating each subject in turn or working chronologically.

Colpus suggests that *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World* makes three key arguments. First, that historians should move on from the view of women's philanthropy as a gendered practice. Second, how philanthropy was a manifestation of the development of women's wider role in society and politics during this period. Third, that philanthropy is a creative endeavor and part of a search for personal as well as political development, thus it "was a revelatory rather than a reactive practice" (28). In doing so she reveals many hidden aspects to her subjects' philanthropy through innovative approaches, such as studying the language and imagery they chose to use. She demonstrates that philanthropy was as often in opposition to government thinking as it was in tandem and was thus highly political.

Ultimately Colpus integrates both the personal histories of her subjects and their approach to philanthropy to demonstrate "that philanthropic practice is indicative of wider and shifting historical forces" (197). *Female Philanthropy in the Interwar World* is not only a notable addition to the history of its topic but a significant work in the history of women's role in society.

PETER GRANT

City University of London