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## INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of the *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries* is devoted to materials in the library special collections relating to women. Its publication acknowledges and honors several events which signal the coming of age of the new scholarly discipline of Women's Studies within Rutgers University: the endowment of a Chair in Women's Studies at Douglass College; the establishment of a Junior Year at Douglass for students pursuing an interest in Women's Studies; the commencement of the Douglass Series on Women's Lives and the Meaning of Gender at the Rutgers University Press; and, in the summer of 1984, both an eight-week seminar for college teachers on "Women's Writing and Women's Culture" sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the annual convention of the National Women's Studies Association.

With over eighty faculty members engaged in research on women, the Rutgers University Libraries have been steadily building up their collections of works by and about women, women's periodicals, and contemporary feminist scholarship. The nucleus for an important collection on women already existed at the Douglass Library, where the best-known materials are probably the letters and manuscripts of the nineteenth-century women's rights leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton. These holdings, described in the *Journal* of June 1982 by Amy Dykeman, reveal Stanton's complex and

radical views on marriage, divorce, religion, child-rearing, and heredity.<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, however, scholars wishing to do research on less well-known women had a difficult time. As the historian Gerda Lerner has explained, "most women have remained among the anonymous in history," and it has been hard to trace historical sources devoted to them. Women's activities have generally not received separate notice, but have been subsumed under male categories; women's auxiliaries did not often keep records; married women have tended to disappear in family archives organized by the names of male members. Lerner notes that "finders' guides, bibliographical tools, and major aids to historical research such as the 'Union List of Manuscripts' reflect and reinforce the tendency to assign women to invisibility."<sup>2</sup> But these problems, equally present in the field of literary history, are now being remedied under the impact of the new scholarship on women. An important research tool is Andrea Hinding's *Women's History Sources—A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States*, which includes a number of items from the Rutgers Special Collections in its New Jersey section.

The three essays in this issue, based on materials from the Rutgers libraries, demonstrate the range of primary sources, hitherto overlooked by historians or literary critics, which can yield fresh and exciting information about women's lives. Jeslyn Medoff, a specialist on 17th- and 18th-century women writers, discusses here the letters and notebooks of Lucretia and Margaret Davidson, American sister-poets of the early 19th century who died of consumption in their teens. The Davidsons' sentimental and uplifting verses, combined with their invalidism and early death, made them heroines of a posthumous literary cult led by their powerful mother. In a period of renewed interest in the cultural tradition of the American woman poet, these child-poets suggest how the female poetic gift became associated with death and the elegiac mode, and how Lucretia "became a symbol of the frail female poet literally consumed by her own sensibility."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Amy Dykeman, "'To Pour Forth from My Own Experience': Two Versions of Elizabeth Cady Stanton," *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*, XLIV (June 1982), 1-16.

<sup>2</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 172-73.

<sup>3</sup> Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 23.

A very different tradition is illustrated by the career of the energetic and long-lived English feminist Agnes Maude Royden (1876-1956). A suffragist and pacifist, Royden firmly believed in the centrality of female values, and in women's equality under the law and in the eyes of God. Her major contributions were in the field of religion and women's role within the church. As Arthur Downing's account of the Royden Collection shows, Royden's views on female spirituality, her critique of the patriarchal church, and her courageous ministry after World War I, anticipate many contemporary issues in feminist theology.

Finally, the story Dean Mary Hartman of Douglass College tells about the scandalous Hall-Mills murder trial shows us the darker side of female experience, and offers an alternative route to the exploration of women's past. An expert on the history of women criminals, and now a resident of the house owned by the protagonists of this celebrated New Brunswick homicide, Dean Hartman's lively account of a unique Rutgers Library collection shows how the records of criminal proceedings may provide students of the lives of women with "windows on the daily habits, reactions and routines of a group normally hidden from history." Whether or not Mrs. Frances Hall arranged to have her husband and his mistress killed, her part in the mystery reveals many significant details about women's lives in the 1920s.

Sainted poetess, crusading minister, suspected murderess—these lives are indeed three very different windows into women's history. In the years ahead, we may anticipate an increased scholarly interest in such collections of women's diaries, letters, scrapbooks, and writings, and a more rich and complex understanding of women's multiple cultural roles. No longer anonymous, invisible, or hidden from history, women's voices can now be added to those of men in the construction of a genuinely universal history of human experience.