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## INTRODUCTION

BY JESLYN MEDOFF

Ms. Medoff is a doctoral candidate in the English Department, Rutgers University

THESE days, it is unnecessary to declare that the history of women's lives has been too long covered in dust; no thinking person would debate it. Hundreds of courses in women's studies, springing up only in the past decade, now attempt to rectify that neglect. Commercial and university presses are making public, and profitable, the diaries, letters, and autobiographical narratives of New England Puritans, grand dames of the Revolution, slave women, plantation mistresses, and pioneers of the Mid-West. Scholars, journalists, poets and novelists begin to reclaim the "lost women," totally obscure or once famous, who comprise our hidden history. This special issue completes volume XLVI of *The Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries* which has focussed on New Jersey women's archives. The six essays, written by graduate students in Professor Elaine Showalter's Nineteenth-Century Women Writers course at Rutgers, examine some of the wealth of women's writing waiting to be discovered and, more importantly, carefully understood.

Five private diaries, documenting the lives of women from 1837 to 1897, and the early records of a women's organization still in existence today, provide a provocative perspective on American women of the nineteenth century. One is struck by the diversity of experiences and interests. A high-spirited daughter of a Paterson

manufacturer goes off to Europe to finish her upper-middle-class education, much like an Edith Wharton heroine. An 1847 Quaker farm woman cooks, sews, cleans, launders, tends the sick, gardens, raises animals and children, and finds time to record these events in an uncomplaining diary. A minister's wife chronicles sixty years of her life as she nurses a houseful of cholera victims, speaks out for women Bible teachers, founds an orphan asylum, and teaches her daughter to quilt. A young woman's journal in mid-century presents a "psychological pilgrimage" in which she envisions her life as a "dark wreath" with few "bright flowers of love and hope and tenderness," an existence bound by "an inescapable triad of masculine oppression"—her father, her husband, and her God. An adolescent Somerville girl attends a coed school just before the turn of the century, neither a Victorian "Angel in the House" nor a twentieth-century "liberated woman," and declares herself "as happy as any girl my age can expect to be." In 1895 a group of women in Metuchen, led by a follower of Susan B. Anthony, found an organization for the promotion of women as "confident, informed, and knowledgeable" citizens, discussing travel, literature, public affairs, and women's education, taking part in a "world beyond the household." These six essays combined create an intriguing, though unfinished, picture of American women's lives one hundred years ago.

Researching women's history is more than a matter of uncovering the unknown and bringing it to light. The essayists here endeavor to read beyond the women's own words, to understand the silences as well as the speech. In women's lives particularly, what is *not* spoken often resonates more deeply than what *is* said. Like the diaries themselves, and most women's work, dusting away the cobwebs from women's history is an unfinished business. This volume is a contribution to the ongoing project of understanding ourselves.