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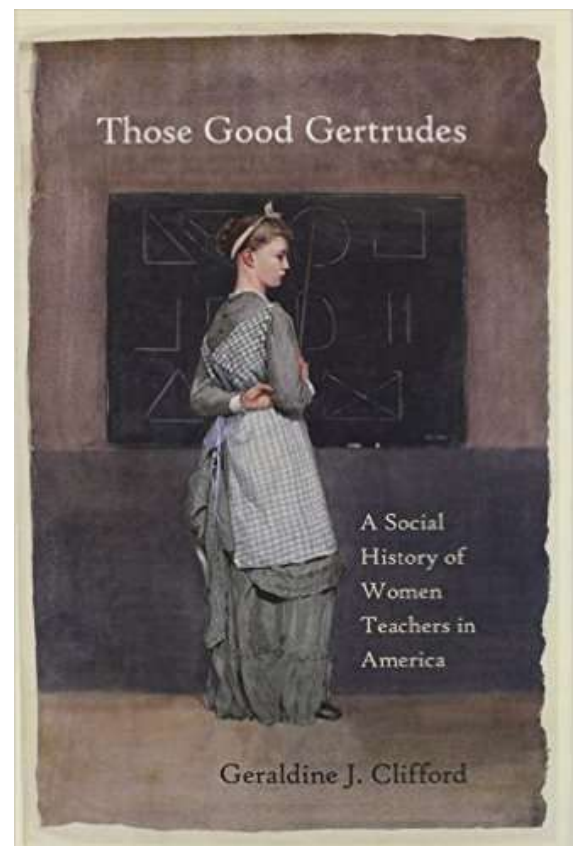
Clifford, G. J. (2014). *Those Good Gertrudes: A social history of women teachers in America*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Few individuals are well poised to write a comprehensive history of women teachers in America. The subject is vast, taunting the mortal scholar. Teaching is the largest profession in the nation and women have thoroughly dominated its ranks for well over a century; consequently, the story includes a cast of multiple millions. Teachers, their lived experiences, their schools, and communities have varied considerably over time and space, practically defying any attempt at coherent analysis. Stereotypes of women teachers have abounded in the popular imagination, differing to some degree from generation to generation, but still stubbornly retaining some lingering traces of long unexamined assumptions. However, historical scholarship that challenges those assumptions has only begun to emerge to a meaningful degree over the past two generations. Prior research typically minimized women's importance school teaching – or ignored them altogether, quite difficult feats given how



overwhelming women's presence has been in teaching. Further complicating matters, much feminist historical work from the past few decades, when it has noted teaching at all, has regarded it as a brief waystation in the lives of notable women before they eventually created larger places for themselves in other endeavors. Seldom has such scholarship placed women teachers in its central focus, showing how the work broadly transformed all women's social, economic, and political possibilities.

Geraldine Clifford, though, has stepped forward to address these daunting challenges – and she is the one to do it. She has written what will surely be known as a breathtakingly encyclopedic history of women teachers, a “collective biography” as she calls it. At one time, Clifford herself taught school in a third grade class in San Lorenzo, CA, and devised an innovative approach to teaching spelling in the process. During her master's coursework, she wrote a paper on the history of spelling instruction, her first foray into the history of education. Her astute professor nominated her for a fellowship at an “eastern institution about which I then knew little and cared less” (p. 21), presumably Teachers College, Columbia University, where she studied with Lawrence Cremin and earned her Ph.D. Her first book, *The Sane Positivist: A Biography of Edward L. Thorndike* (1968), was a revision of her doctoral dissertation and the start of long and abiding interest in biography, broadly defined. Her subsequent biographical works, written after the feminist turn early in her career (2011, p. 31), are *Lone Voyagers: Academic Women in Coeducational Universities, 1870-1937* (1989), *Equally in View: The University of California, Its Women, and the Schools* (1995), and a wide range of book chapters and journal articles. Clifford has said of her own scholarly corpus that “biography-writing is the clearest link of my work, from first to last” (2011, p. 30). Given this, *Those Good Gertrudes* is certainly the crowning achievement of her biographical work, a mosaic of hundreds, if not thousands

of briefly-told life stories arranged to reveal larger recognizable stories of women teachers' shared history.

For the past 25 years, Clifford has worked on *Those Good Gertrudes*, traveling extensively around the country – and world – to gather personal history documents from a staggering 628 collections (xii). The list is so extensive that it could not be published in the printed version of the book, but instead is found on the Johns Hopkins University Press website (2014). To this, Clifford has added popular culture representations of teachers including literature, movies, and television shows, and, of course, she brings her vast knowledge of existent scholarship on the history of American education, particularly about teachers. In all, she collected materials representing the lives of women, and a few men, from nearly every conceivable part of America, from the points at which documentary evidence could have been generated through to the present. The women who populate her pages represent many races/ethnicities, come from a broad range of economic and social circumstances, constitute a provocative array of solitary or familial/communal living arrangements, cover most of the human lifespan, possess a mix of temperaments and talents, faced utterly mundane as well as extraordinary challenges, and were caught up, every one, in the unique possibilities of her particular historical moment. As Clifford has explained, “teachers do not have to be ‘great’ by any accepted definition – or popular or even effective – to be significant in individual or societal terms” (xi) and thus relevant to her account. With her net cast wide and such a monumental trove of data in hand, how could Clifford possibly bring some meaningful order to this story? She has resolved this thorny matter by organizing the book into 13 thematic chapters. Within chapters, each arranged in loose chronological order, are what she calls “composite portrayals” alongside “short case studies” (p. xiii), an ongoing mix of the general and the specific. This interplay of individual voices

with aggregate understandings forms an ever-present pulse that animates the book. At times, the leaps between these individual stories are wide and jarring – sometimes even confusing, but Clifford’s reliable return to a larger view steadies her narrative and moves it forward.

The book actually begins with its title, which refers only indirectly to Pestalozzi’s *Leonard and Gertrude* (1781), the fictional work idealizing how Gertrude, with her wondrous reserves of love, teaches her own children to live honorably and fully, and in the process, inspires the school and community. Instead, Clifford refers mainly to G. Stanley Hall’s preface to the 1875 edition of *Leonard and Gertrude* in which he idealizes Gertrude as the “Good Teacher by whom alone the world is to be saved,” and furthermore that through “the love and devotion of noble women overflowing from the domestic circle into the community,” certainly “the good Gertrudes of all stations in life [are] the born educators of the race.” By appropriating Hall’s patriarchal term, steeped as it is with its gender-limiting implications, Clifford is then free to re-examine and re-cast it, exploring both its confining stereotypes as well as everything that Hall and his ilk largely missed – much as women teachers themselves often endured the petty restrictions placed on them while at the same time leveraging their unique positions for greatly expanded powers.

The first chapter provides a broad historical context for the remainder of the book, sweeping quickly through time and across the globe to profile teachers from ancient Egypt and medieval Italy to those who started English dame school in the 1700s. In the second and third chapters, Clifford impressively recounts many complex ways that women transitioned from teaching mothers, governesses, and dame school teachers to independent, salary-earning common school teachers of the nineteenth century. Her analysis suggests that before women essentially took over the work of teaching in common schools, they taught far more extensively – in

many different configurations – than generally has been acknowledged. The fourth chapter recounts many of the diverse reasons that women chose to become teachers during the nineteenth century, in some ways undercutting or certainly challenging more monolithic views about women’s motivations and opportunities. In chapter five, Clifford answers the question of who became teachers by presenting a patchwork of examples from across the full demographic richness of her material, demonstrating a more complex mix of individuals than stereotypical images allow. She then turns her attention to the marital status of teachers and their domestic arrangements in chapter six, revealing a more complicated set of stories than may have been told in some other historical work on women teachers. She asserts that the pervasiveness and impact of marriage bars were not as significant in women’s employment as teachers as generally believed. Despite her care in presenting a range of possible familial arrangements in this chapter, though, she devotes surprisingly little discussion to women who defied the bounds of conventional sexuality and/or gendered identities, especially given the pervasiveness of unmarried, widowed, or divorced women teachers until the mid-twentieth century. In chapter seven, Clifford examines ways in which teachers have been viewed that have effectively constrained their gendered possibilities, behaviors, and opportunities, locking them into a sort of perennial “quest for perfection” that too often is simply stultifying. Clifford describes the ways that teachers have become trained professionals in chapter eight, ways ranging from academies, seminaries, normal schools, and programs in colleges and universities to teachers’ institutes and union activities. She explores some of the ways that teachers have encountered their students and negotiated rituals and the ever-tricky balance of power in the classroom in chapter nine. An important part of this discussion is her analysis of classroom disciplinary practices by teacher

gender, with different challenges and opportunities available accordingly.

Clifford deviates from her thematic approach in chapter ten by paring down her analysis and instead allowing the more extended words of a handful of teachers to speak for themselves, drawing from diaries and correspondence of teachers in such places as the prairie Midwest, New York, and a Kentucky community of spinsters. She returns to her thematic approach in chapter 11 as she recounts stories of women who have embraced teaching as a means of spreading their religious zeal both at home and abroad. In chapter 12, Clifford details the flow of women into teaching and the concomitant rise of the women's suffrage movement, the latter inextricably bound up with the former, as she explains that it was teaching that gradually allowed women to leverage their rights through to the achievement of full suffrage, a powerful, compelling argument. Clifford closes the book by exploring the twentieth century expansion of women's employment opportunities and how this has impacted their decisions about whether or not to pursue teaching.

In the end, Clifford's book is monumental in its scope and ambition. In this, it stands in contrast with numerous other works generated over the past few decades that pursue more carefully bounded studies of specific individuals, groups of women educators, time periods, regions, or institutions, for example. These more focused works have allowed us collectively to learn in great depth about, for instance, women who joined or led teachers unions, African-American women teachers in the reconstruction South, Latina teachers in the

Southwest, lesbian and gay teachers during the Cold War, women school administrators, and so many other specific stories. Clifford's aspiration is different, though. She has endeavored to write an extraordinarily broad social history of women teachers, with her arguments supported by representative examples. By its nature, this work suggests many ways that teachers lived and worked rather than attempting to definitively articulate their commonalities, though such an attempt would bring greater coherence to this wide-ranging volume. In the end, I would argue that both kinds of work are necessary.

Through this volume, Clifford undoubtedly will stimulate many contemporary scholars to probe some of the challenging ideas she poses. Education researchers generally will find it to be a comprehensive historical reference on the lives and work of teachers. Historians of education and women's and gender studies will find this book of particular interest because of the author's challenges to conventional understandings about women teachers as well as for the rich telling and impressive sources that she has uncovered. And then perhaps Clifford will have succeeded in nudging us closer to the time when women teachers are understood to have played a far more important role in our national history than previously acknowledged.

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### **About the Reviewer**

Jackie M. Blount is Professor of Educational Studies at Ohio State University. She has written *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency, 1873-1995* (SUNY Press, 1998) and *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (SUNY Press, 2005). Her work has been published in journals such as *Harvard Educational Review*, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, and *Review of Educational Research*. Currently, she is President-Elect of the History of Education Society.



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