

Mobilizing Minerva: American Women in the First World War

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Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes (1983); and *Winning Is the Only Thing: Sports in America since 1945* (coauthor, 1989).

In an age before professional wrestling became a branch of acting, Frank Gotch was the master of the sport. Between 1908 and 1913 he ruled the professional sport as heavyweight champion. After winning the title in a two-hour marathon match against George Hackenschmidt, the reigning champion, Gotch became a sports celebrity. He was friends with former heavyweight boxing champion James J. Jeffries, twice visited President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House, and was courted by Iowa Republican politicians to run for governor. He toured the country in plays, flirted with a career in the movies, and thoroughly capitalized on his fame through the medium of advertising. After retiring from professional wrestling, he traveled with the Sells-Floto Circus offering \$250 to anyone who could last 15 minutes in the ring with him. He died in 1917 at the age of 39.

Gotch was one of Iowa's premier athletes. Born in Humboldt and raised on a farm, he developed tremendous body strength, but what really separated him from most other wrestlers was his interest in the science of the sport. As he mastered technique, he mastered opponents. His style was aggressive, occasionally dirty, and always relentless. His style and popularity did much to legitimize the sport. The singular tradition of wrestling in Iowa owes much to the career of Frank Gotch.

In his brief overview of Gotch's career, Mike Chapman provides the basic facts of the wrestler's life and tries to separate the legends from the realities. Certainly he demonstrates the crucial impact Gotch had on the sport of wrestling, and although he does not devote much space to the role the wrestler played in American culture, he does make it clear that it is a subject worth more study. In some ways, Gotch was as important as such boxers of the era as Jack Johnson, Jim Jefferies, and the young Jack Dempsey.

Mobilizing Minerva: American Women in the First World War, by Kimberly Jensen. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xvii, 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

Reviewer Kathleen Scott will receive her Ph.D. in American studies from The College of William and Mary in May 2009. In her dissertation she analyzes how dominant race, class, and gender ideologies inflected dietitians' quest for professionalization during World War I. She has also directed the Oral History Program at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc.

Kimberly Jensen's new book, *Mobilizing Minerva*, is an important contribution to the field of U.S. women's military history. Her analysis

indicates a maturation in the expanding literature on women and gender and war. Articulating women's wartime activism through the rubrics of professionalization, citizenship, and anti-violence activism during important transformations in American liberalism is an arduous task with no simple answers.

Mobilizing Minerva is structured around five fundamental ideas. First, Jensen holds that war, violence, and activism must be understood in a specific historical context. Second, she claims that three particular case studies — nurses, female physicians, and women-at-arms — show how women defined citizenship and illustrate the complexity of various suffrage campaigns. Jensen's third point concerns debates over women, war, and violence. "The violence of war," she writes, "had many effects on women's health and well-being, including sexual and physical assault, destruction of homes and property, poverty and dislocation" (114). Jensen argues that these groups of women sought to transform and redefine the military in ways that would protect women from violence. Fourth, Jensen analyzes their strategies before the war, the debates, and their wartime choices. She contends that women's activism during World War I ultimately affected how the nation understood and waged war. Just as women gained little actual power with suffrage, these wartime steps taken by female physicians, nurses, and women-at-arms were also, Jensen cautions, limited in scope. Jensen's case studies are compelling. For example, in her discussion of Americans' fascination with the Russian Battalion of Death, she draws on popular accounts to explain how women of the battalion took up arms as a way to shame men into assuming their role as protectors. The alleged "deviance" of the female soldier became one of the most effective talking points in anti-suffrage rhetoric because it underscored the failure of men as protectors. After the war, policy makers, civic leaders, and the media crafted a new model for citizenship by impelling former soldiers into new roles as consumer-civilians. This, according to Jensen, was as one prelude to an American century of militarization.

That Jensen brackets aspiring female medical professionals (physicians and nurses) along with women-at-arms under the same title challenges readers to consider anti-violence activism as an analytic framework for women, gender, and war. This is perhaps the book's greatest strength and weakness. Jensen ties these three groups of women together by emphasizing their unique strands of anti-violence activism. She examines how all-female medical units identified rape and violence as they negotiated their identities as women, aspiring professionals, and colonizers. She argues that military nurses sought rank as an antidote to hostile wartime workplaces. And she holds that

women-at-arms challenged the conventional gender roles of the male protector and female protectee.

But Jensen's anti-violence framework presents a serious quandary. To what extent did female physicians, military nurses, and women-at-arms tacitly (or explicitly) facilitate the role of government institutions in reproducing *new* forms of violence against women. Women in military medicine and nursing — particularly those seeking occupational respect, rank, and recognition — were not innocent bystanders in the reproduction of *new* forms of violence against women. More to the point, women's moves to professionalize (and gain fuller expressions of citizenship) were largely contingent upon the exploitation and oppression of non-dominant groups.

Particularly in the context of overlapping rubrics of professionalism and citizenship, more substantive attention to race and class would have balanced Jensen's arguments. There is truth in the notion that white, middle-class, native-born, Protestant women sought to transform the early twentieth-century military into an institution to protect women, but as aspiring medical professionals, they sought to protect a certain type of woman and a particular strain of white, native-born, middle-class, Protestant American womanhood. To what extent did aspiring professional medical women and nurses actually sustain and support normative race, class, and gender ideologies based on white male power? Perhaps more attention to the existing literature on maternalism and the role of these particular women in the creation of the welfare state would have enriched the analysis. Deeper consideration of the internecine conflicts within and among women in the expanding female medical hierarchy would have also been useful.

Precisely because this analysis raises more questions than it answers, *Mobilizing Minerva* will intrigue those interested in turn-of-the-century U.S. women's history. Given the rich history of women's activism in and around Fort Des Moines and Camp Dodge during World War I, Jensen's book will also appeal to Iowans seeking a broader foundation for understanding the political, economic, and cultural context of women's wartime activism in Progressive Era America. To be sure, women's anti-violence activism at home and abroad during World War I provides, as Jensen writes, "important lessons for continuing responses to the issues they confronted and those we confront today" (175).

Eight Women, Two Model Ts, and the American West, by Joanne Wilke. Women in the West Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. 169 pp. Illustrations. \$18.95 paper.