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Introduction: 'Women as Wives and Workers: Marking Fifty Years of The Feminine Mystique' Special Issue

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This is a copy of the final published version of an article published in *History of Women in the Americas*, volume 3 (2015), pp.1-8.

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The published version is available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14296/hwa.v3i0.2187>

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Introduction: 'Women as Wives and Workers: Marking Fifty Years of *The Feminine Mystique*' Special Issue**Rachel Ritchie, Helen Glew, Jane Hamlett, Sinead McEneaney and Zoe Thomas**

When Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, few could have predicted the wide-ranging impact it would have and the controversies that would follow it. The sales of Friedan's book were extraordinary. Despite an initial print run of only a few thousand, *The Feminine Mystique* spent six weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list and 1.4 million copies of the first paperback printing were sold, with millions more to follow.¹ Five decades later, the book retains iconic status. It now forms part of the canon of second wave feminism, sitting alongside Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. Undergraduate students of contemporary American and/or gender history and culture rarely escape it on course syllabi. The book resonated as much with women outside of the US, and Friedan's appeal within the UK coincided with the start of legal reform on issues of contraception and abortion as well as debates on pay equality. More recently, left-wing British broadsheet *The Guardian* described it as 'the classic feminist work' when inviting readers to participate in a 'pop-up book-club' to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its publication, albeit with the confession that 'to be honest, some of us are just getting around to reading it'.² Whether one had read the book or not, there was a sense that the starting point for second wave feminism – rightly or wrongly – was Betty Friedan. The fiftieth anniversary of the book's publication seemed to reinforce that *The Feminine Mystique* and Friedan's name have come to serve as by-words for feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

The breadth of anniversary press coverage in the Anglo-American world was no doubt in part due to the re-issue of the book in commemorative edition format, with new introductions and afterwords by prominent journalists.³ But there was an energy to the discussion of the book. Much of the coverage suggests ongoing engagement – at a variety of levels – with Friedan's ideas and assertions. As Janet Maslin pointed out in *The New York Times*, certain parts of the book are 'evergreen' because they are

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¹ Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 4; Peter Dreier, "The Feminine Mystique and Women's Equality – 50 Years Later", http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/the-feminine-mystique-betty-friedan_b_2712355.html, (accessed 14 January 2015).

² Emma G. Keller, "Pop-up book club: *The Feminine Mystique*", <http://www.theguardian.com/books/us-news-blog/2013/feb/19/the-feminine-mystique-pop-up-book-club>, (accessed 14 January 2015).

³ For example, see Lionel Shriver, "Introduction", in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (London: Penguin, 2010).

still familiar to us.⁴ Writing in *The Toronto Star* under the headline 'Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* remains scarily current', Heather Mallick documented the pressures that women remain under, particularly those relating to appearance and to the consequences of straitened economic times.⁵ Many have commented on the anger prevalent throughout the book, an anger that galvanised readers on its first publication and remains relevant fifty years later.⁶ Other writers, such as Catherine Scott in the UK's *Daily Telegraph*, spoke of the ways in which Friedan's feminism had been challenged and surpassed, but drew parallels with the new (old) battles for women's reproductive rights.⁷

Another major strand in the anniversary media coverage was the idea of timeliness, focusing on how women reacted to the book at the time of publication and since. Friedan's critique of domesticity certainly gained traction amongst her contemporaries. In the UK, for example, sociologist Hannah Gavron conducted research into the experiences of young mothers; her negative assessment of their situation appeared in *The Captive Wife* (1966).⁸ But no other writer captured the public imagination on either side of the Atlantic as effectively as Friedan did in her account of 'the problem that has no name'. In part, this success is attributable to Friedan's skills as a journalist. *The Feminine Mystique* was readable and persuasive as well as being relatable for many women. As Daniel Horowitz has argued, part of Friedan's success was bringing together concurrent contemporaneous debates in an accessible format whilst also making her readers believe that the confines described in *The Feminine Mystique* were her own experience.⁹ It also resonated with what was already a burgeoning zeitgeist. A later biographer noted that 'Betty caught the wave...the right book at the right time'.¹⁰

As Stephanie Coontz's recent book has shown, women continue to have very strong reactions to Friedan's text.¹¹ Canada's *The Globe and Mail* published a conversation between three of its female

⁴ Janet Maslin, "Looking Back at a Domestic Cri de Coeur", *The New York Times*, 18 February 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/books/betty-friedans-feminine-mystique-50-years-later.html>, (accessed 28 November 2013).

⁵ Heather Mallick, "Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* Remains Scarily Current", *Toronto Star*, 18 February 2013, http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/2013/02/18/betty_friedans_the_feminine_mystique_remains_scarily_current_mallick.html, (accessed 28 November 2013).

⁶ See, amongst the other articles referred to here, Louis Menand, "Books as Bombs: Why the Women's Movement needed *The Feminine Mystique*", *The New Yorker*, 24 January 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/24/books-as-bombs>, (accessed 28 November 2013).

⁷ Catherine Scott, "50th Anniversary of *The Feminine Mystique*: Is This Groundbreaking Book Still Relevant Today?", *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 March 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9900886/50th-anniversary-of-The-Feminine-Mystique-is-this-groundbreaking-book-still-relevant-today.html>, (accessed 28 November 2013).

⁸ Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

⁹ Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*, 2.

¹⁰ Judith Hennessee, *Betty Friedan: Her Life* (New York: Random House, 1999), 80.

¹¹ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

journalists in which they discussed their responses to the book.¹² The US edition of *Good Housekeeping*, which had published excerpts from *The Feminine Mystique* at the time of the book's original publication, asked its 2013 readers whether they felt Friedan's ideas 'were on target or off base' and invited online comments.¹³ Similarly, the US blog on *The Guardian's* website hosted a three-day 'pop-up book club' inviting readers to join daily Twitter conversations as they re-read the text.¹⁴

At the same time, some of the fiftieth anniversary coverage pointed to negative reactions to the book in 1963 and afterwards, often summarising scholarly work to do this. *The New York Times* was most upfront about dissenting views about the book, noting publishers' misgivings, problems with the narrative of Friedan's own life in relation to the book and criticisms of the book from different interest groups.¹⁵ *The Atlantic* also published early reviews of the book, many of which dissented from Friedan's assertions.¹⁶ Indeed, contemporary criticism was rife. Publishers described *Sixpence in her Shoe* (1964), by poet Phyllis McGinley, as 'The book that talks back to *The Feminine Mystique*'.¹⁷ As literary scholar Jo Gill observes in her recent article on McGinley and Friedan, the former 'speaks up for a generation of stay-at-home mothers who felt their positions to be under attack from a male culture determined to belittle them, and from a nascent feminist movement which seemed equally engaged in disparaging their choices and pushing them into the public world of work'.¹⁸ Gill goes on to note that the draft title for *Sixpence in her Shoe* was *Profession: housewife*, alluding to the wording of census forms. In her 1971 *Occupation: Housewife* (the title also echoing the census), sociology professor Helena Znaniecki Lopata further criticises Friedan's derisory attitude towards women's domestic roles, arguing that women could be 'competent and creative in their social role as housewife' and gain a sense of self-worth through a growing sense of status associated with domesticity.¹⁹

¹² "How Far Have Women Come in the 50 years since Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*?", *The Globe and Mail*, 2 February 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/how-far-have-women-come-in-the-50-years-since-betty-friedans-feminine-mystique/article8141883/?page=all>, (accessed 28 November 2013).

¹³ "'Women Are People, Too!': The Groundbreaking Article by Betty Friedan", *Good Housekeeping*, <http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/family/work-careers/1960-betty-friedan-article>, (accessed 28 November 2013).

¹⁴ For the introductory post to the popup book club, see Emma G. Keller, "Pop-up Book Club: *The Feminine Mystique*", *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/us-news-blog/2013/feb/19/the-feminine-mystique-pop-up-book-club>, (accessed 20 February 2013).

¹⁵ Jennifer Schuessler, "Criticisms of *The Feminine Mystique* Abound," *The New York Times*, 24 February 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/books/50-years-of-reassessing-the-feminine-mystique.html?_r=0, (accessed 28 November 2013).

¹⁶ Ashley Fetters, "The Skeptical Early Reviews of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*", *The Atlantic*, 13 February 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/02/the-skeptical-early-reviews-of-betty-friedans-the-feminine-mystique/272659/>, (accessed 20 May 2015).

¹⁷ Jo Gill, "'Quite the opposite of a feminist': Phyllis McGinley, Betty Friedan and Discourses of Gender in Mid-century American Culture", *Women's History Review* 22 (2013): 424.

¹⁸ Gill, "Quite the Opposite of a Feminist", 430.

¹⁹ Helena Znaniecki Lopata, *Occupation: Housewife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 362.

As this example indicates, *The Feminine Mystique* has been criticised in academic circles since its publication. While the recent media interest focused on the anniversary as a means to probe on-going debates about 'what women want', academics have continued to explore the problematic assumptions that lie at the heart of the book, notably issues regarding race, economics and variations of feminism.²⁰ Contributors to the 2010 edited collection *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America*, for instance, investigate the multiple ways in which the lives of Jewish women diverged from the narrative Friedan provides.²¹ Other scholars have revisited the source material that Friedan drew upon. Joanne Meyerowitz, for example, returns to the magazines that Friedan cited, exposing her reading as at best partial and selective.²²

Given this continued engagement with Friedan's work and ideas, and the widespread coverage of the book's fiftieth year by media and press on both sides of the Atlantic, it is perhaps surprising that the academic world in Britain seemed to give only scant attention to the anniversary of its publication. In an effort to better understand and articulate the impact of the book on academic scholarship, the Society for Historians of Women in the Americas (SHAW) joined with the Bedford Centre for Women's History at Royal Holloway, University of London, to host an anniversary conference in November 2013. The conference's title, 'Women as Wives and Workers: Marking Fifty Years of *The Feminine Mystique*',

²⁰ Some notable discussions include Joanne Boucher and Cecilia Olivares, "Betty Friedan y el Pasado Radical del Feminismo Liberal", *Debate Feminista* 35 (2007), 277-294; Rachel Bowlby, "'The Problem with No Name': Rereading Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*", *Feminist Review* 27 (1987), 61-75; Dorothy Chansky, "Usable Performance Feminism for Our Time: Reconsidering Betty Friedan", *Theatre Journal* 60 (2008), 341-364; Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Gill, "Quite the Opposite of a Feminist", 422-439; Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Ali Haggett, *Desperate Housewives, Neuroses and the Domestic Environment, 1945-1970* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012); Rebecca Isaacs, "The Feminine Mystake: Betty Friedan and the Dogma of Domesticity in 1950s America" (MPhil diss., University of Birmingham, 2011); Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958", *Journal of American History* 79 (1993), 1455-1482 [reprinted as "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958", in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 229-262]; Jessica Weiss, "'Fraud of Femininity': Domesticity, Selflessness, and Individualism in Responses to Betty Friedan", in *Liberty and Justice for All?: Rethinking Politics in Cold War America*, ed. Kathleen G. Donohue (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 124-154.

For discussions of the persona of Friedan herself, see Lisa Frederiksen Bohannon, *Woman's Work: the Story of Betty Friedan* (Greensboro, North Carolina: Morgan Reynolds, 2004); Hennessee, *Betty Friedan*; Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*; Daniel Horowitz, "Rethinking Betty Friedan and the Feminine Mystique: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America", *American Quarterly* 48 (1996), 1-42; Susan Oliver, *Betty Friedan: the Personal is Political* (London: Pearson Longman, 2008).

²¹ Hasia R. Diner, Shira Kohn and Rachel Kranson eds., *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

²² Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique", 229-262.

reflected some of our central questions and concerns. Friedan's reading of magazines, however partial and selective, formed the core of her position on women's happiness, which she saw as intimately bound up with their participation as (professional) individuals in the workplace. Nowadays, work outside the home – usually but not exclusively paid work – has become the norm for the vast majority of women. As a result, we, along with some in the media and press, wondered about the extent to which the book still resonates with women, especially when such employment has not always proved itself to be the route to women's self-satisfaction. Furthermore, how far would the book's message be overshadowed by its silences, such as those around women of colour, working-class women and women who did not identify as heterosexual?

A wide range of academics from different disciplines and career stages came together on the day, generating new connections and new insights. This special issue represents a snapshot of that intellectual conversation. The articles included here showcase some of the research presented, adding to the existing and growing body of literature which considers the evolution of feminism since *The Feminine Mystique's* publication. They capture some of the breadth and depth of recent research and discussion of Friedan's impact on feminisms, both within and outside of the US. Some engage directly with Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*, whereas others use her work as a springboard for a wider discussion of issues including employment, motherhood, race, social class and voluntary activism.

Jay Kleinberg's contribution is based on her keynote paper at the conference, where she explored the book itself whilst also probing the complexities of married women's paid employment in the US during the post-war decades. The resulting article, co-written with Rachel Ritchie, continues this analysis, engaging with both conference themes: wives and workers. They begin by contextualising *The Feminine Mystique* and reflecting on why Friedan rejected other possible solutions to 'the problem that has no name'. Instead of psychiatry or consumer society offering the answer, Friedan believed that only commitment to professional work could solve the crisis that her interviewees and others faced. However, there was a social class bias inherent within Friedan's findings. Her argument was famously built upon the findings of a questionnaire which she sent to other alumni of Smith College, ensuring that the experiences of these upper- and upper-middle class women became the heart of *The Feminine Mystique*. Other groups of readers may have identified with her account, but her presentation of the problem and the solution concealed what life was like for many other Americans, particularly non-white women and working-class women. The second part of Kleinberg and Ritchie's article goes on to demonstrate the extent to which a broader focus than the one offered by Friedan provides an entirely different picture of US womanhood in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s. They examine labour force participation rates, revealing just how many women – including large numbers of married women – were already in paid employment. Breakdowns by age, race, marital status and age of children follow. These continue to complicate the nexus of wives and workers, pointing to long-term trends that disrupt not only Friedan's narrative but widely-accepted understandings of changes to married women's employment patterns in the twentieth-century US.

Gwen Jordan's article focuses on the reception of Friedan's book in her hometown of Peoria, Illinois. It provides a fascinating insight into the experiences of the white, educated, upper-middle-class women of Peoria during this period, who were representative of the women that Friedan wrote about in *The Feminine Mystique* and part of the society to which Friedan herself belonged. Jordan's research reveals that most of the women in Peoria had never read the book, and only a few claimed they had experienced 'the problem that has no name'. Whilst accepting that their life choices may have at times been limited, they denied that they felt the malaise of the housewife that Friedan described. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan asserted that the role of women as volunteers in the community was problematic as it prevented them from taking leadership positions. Yet Jordan's exploration shows that the many women in Peoria who were heavily engaged in voluntary work felt satisfaction in their roles. Jordan describes them throughout as 'female professional volunteers' and considers professional identity as something that cannot be defined solely through financial recompense. Jordan also provides examples of the connected route from voluntary work, or 'civic activism', to a range of paid employment opportunities in the community. This angle highlights a broader need to contextualise Friedan's work within a wider understanding of women's life experience – even within the white, upper-class society of which Friedan was part.

In his contribution, Jon Coburn goes beyond Friedan's text to grapple with the apparent disconnect between the feminine and the feminist within the rhetoric and agency of the group Women Strike for Peace (WSP), which gained national attention in the early 1960s. Setting his discussion against the background of Friedan's criticism of the group, Coburn argues that Friedan's dismissal of WSP as 'just housewives' was short-sighted and failed to recognise the complex relationship between WSP and an emerging language of second wave feminism. He examines a range of responses by WSP members to the substance of Friedan's critique and demonstrates how their roles as mothers and housewives intersected with, and indeed informed, their political activism. The actions of WSP members reveal an inherent problem in assessing women's political activism, especially that of women who do not self-identify as feminists. When women push the boundaries of society, they do not always do this with a feminist consciousness. For Friedan, 'the problem that has no name' described a difficulty to articulate a sense of women's absence within wider American society and an inability to conceptualise women's roles outside the home. As Coburn demonstrates, this analysis helps in only limited ways in understanding the depth of women's activism in post-war America. But equally, the members of WSP found it difficult to conceptualise their own contribution to feminist activism. Coburn's research prompts us to think carefully about the unintended consequences of women's activism and how this feeds into broadening feminist interpretations of women's engagement with non-traditional roles.

Catriona Beaumont looks back to the meaning of being a housewife in the decade immediately before Friedan's text was published. The 1950s are often associated with the dominance of an oppressive domesticity that narrowed women's lives, rendering them mere helpmeets to husbands and children, confining them to cleaning and washing, carefully straining the gravy and always smiling. This image was frequently found in some contemporary women's magazines. In part, though, it was also reinforced by feminist critics like Friedan when they reacted against it. Beaumont, however, offers a more nuanced

picture, exploring how ideas of wifedom and domesticity were articulated by housewives associations in 1950s Britain, including National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Mothers' Union and Townswomen's Guilds. In a similar vein to recent histories of women in mid-twentieth century North America and Australia, Beaumont argues that these organisations envisaged wives as citizens who drew on their domestic expertise to play an active role in the state. Rather than reinforcing a conservative vision of domesticity, the associations forged a new version that responded to social change in the era, in particular the rising numbers of mothers who were going back to work part-time after bringing up young children. Instead of condemning women who stepped outside their conventional domestic role, these organisations tried to find ways of supporting them. Their campaigns on women's political issues were also instrumental in securing important legislative change, including increasing the earnings limit for widowed mothers who received a state allowance. Overall, Beaumont moves us significantly beyond Friedan's original picture of the domestically limited 1950s housewife.

Examining some of the absences in *The Feminine Mystique*, Eilidh Hall explores Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far From God* in the context of Friedan's text. Castillo's Chicana characters are surrounded by both the dominant English-speaking, white American culture and a traditional Mexican culture which predominantly sees women as wives and mothers. In trying to navigate their lives, the women confront a complex and interlocking set of oppressions, rooted in gender, race and class, and each woman handles these differently in the course of the novel. For Hall, Castillo's writing acts as a dialogue with Friedan's assertions, showing how paid work was not – and is not – necessarily a salvation for Chicana women. Instead work was not a choice but a mode of survival that brought its own dangers. By contrast, Friedan's relative dismissal of community work as not sufficiently widening wives' horizons and opportunities is refuted in the novel, as it has value to the wife and mother character, Sofi, solidifying her role in the community.

A note on the conference:

The 'Women as Wives and Workers: Marking Fifty Years of *The Feminine Mystique*' conference was co-organised and hosted by the Society for the History of Women in the Americas (SHAW) and Bedford Centre for the History of Women in the History Department at Royal Holloway, University of London. The Bedford Centre promotes research into the history of women and gender, and celebrates the longstanding contribution of Royal Holloway and Bedford New College to women's higher education and intellectual lives. Founded in 1999 by Professors Lyndal Roper and Amanda Vickery, the centre pioneered the field when the study of the history of gender first came to fruition. Today, the history of women and gender is an accepted part of mainstream history, but remains fundamental to the work of the History Department at Royal Holloway. The conference took place in the main lecture theatre of Royal Holloway's historic Founders Building, providing a sense of continuity between today's feminist historians and the female pioneers of higher education who began their careers there in the late nineteenth century.

The Society for the History of Women in the Americas (SHAW), founded by Professor Jay Kleinberg in 2008, is a scholarly association dedicated to the historical investigation of women and gender in North America, South America and the Caribbean, either within or between nation states and/or the northern or southern hemispheres. One of the Society's core aims is to organise a range of events every year whereby scholars can come together to create both personal networks and professional collaborations. The annual SHAW conference has always been central to this, and was particularly so when co-hosting 'Women as Wives and Workers: Marking Fifty Years of *The Feminine Mystique*' with the Bedford Centre.