

didactic fiction was resumed in the late nineteenth century with the “new didacticism” of the radical New Woman authors. While scrupulously situating her study in relation to other scholars’ work, Wood mostly relegates her disagreements to the notes, which makes for attractive reading, as do the clarity of her arguments, the economic use of her evidentiary material, and her judicious conclusions.

DIVINE FEMININE: THEOSOPHY AND FEMINISM IN ENGLAND

Joy Dixon
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University
Press, 2001

REVIEWED BY SAMUEL
WAGAR

Although there is an academic and left political bias in favour of the secular which has shaped historical analysis of the feminist movement of late Victorian England, Joy Dixon argues eloquently and effectively that this movement was seen by many of its participants as primarily a spiritual crusade expressed through political means. It was not, however, a Christian spiritual crusade and, give the bias of Western Euro-American cultures to equate Christianity with religion, the spiritual base of large parts of the feminist movement—in the occultist new religion of Theosophy—has been rendered effectively invisible to historians.

Dixon has opened up a great new avenue of investigation in her excellent book by challenging the secularist bias of analysis of the feminist movement. In addition to the benefit of broadening our understanding of the influences which persist from these predecessors to the mod-

ern feminist movement, Dixon effectively demonstrates that Theosophy was a key link in establishing the feminists as anti-Imperialists (though bringing the ideas of Hinduism into Euro-American culture as honoured and valued sources of insight), that it was highly involved in the key debates of the time around sexuality, defining femininity and masculinity, and that Theosophy was a vital aspect of the third strand of socialist thought—ethical socialism, which was largely eclipsed by social-democracy and Marxism in the 1920s.

She traces the various stages through which the Theosophical Society developed, pointing to the contradictory aspects of notions of the ‘essentially feminine’, ‘Great Mother’ and the type of immanentist spirituality and ‘Orientalist’ Hinduism brought forward by the TS. Many of the debates and developments in the late Victorian feminist movement are stages that the modern movement has also passed through and by demonstrating a spiritual as well as political continuity between the feminist movements of the later Victorians and the present day, Dixon opens up the history of the contemporary movement as well. Theosophy is an ancestor of Wicca and its occultism is directly ancestral to the ritual magic of Goddess spirituality.

The spiritual wing of the modern movement is in danger of danger of detaching the spiritual from the political much as the TS did in the 1920s (although the strong presence of neo-Pagans in Gaia Resistance and the Pagan Cluster at the G8 protests in Calgary in 2002 indicate that the separation is by no means complete), and Dixon’s history of those developments, bringing in the racial discussion, the sexual politics, and sexuality debates of the time, offers a valuable perspective on our own movement.

The links between the different left-wing, counter-cultural, and occultist communities were not limited to the UK in this period. In Canada the two leading feminists of

the day Emily Stowe and Augusta Stowe-Gullen, together with a feminist associate of theirs, Margaret Denison, were among the founding members of the Canadian Theosophical Society in 1891. Leading members of the Canadian TS formed five of the eight members of the founding Council of the Socialist League in 1894, and many prominent intellectual and cultural figures through to the 1930s belonged to the TS.

By reintroducing the spiritual and by broadening out the term to include the occultist and non-mainstream religions Dixon has explained aspects of the analysis and activism of British feminists in the late Victorian period that were hitherto less clear. The research remains to be done in other countries by my own research in Canada indicates that very similar factors were in operation here and that, if anything, Theosophy was even more important in the Canadian feminist left of the time.

THE BITCH IN THE HOUSE: 26 WOMEN TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT SEX, SOLITUDE, WORK, MOTHERHOOD, AND MARRIAGE

Cathi Hanauer, Ed.
New York: Perennial HarperCollins,
2003

REVIEWED BY SHARON
FERGUSON-HOOD AND MARIE
TOVELL WALKER

The Bitch in the House, a collection of essays from 26 women, is an intriguing exploration of love, sex, work, motherhood, marriage, divorce, and growing older. Contributors are from a wide range of