

Spears, Betty. *Leading the Way: Amy Morris Homans and the Beginnings of Professional Education for Women*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986. Pp. xiv, 179. Photographs, notes, index. \$39.95.

Those of us who have known Betty Spears for many years have waited for this book about Amy Morris Homans. We had opportunities to share Spears' understanding of Homans as it evolved, and we sensed that the eventual monograph would be a "first" in the history of the professionalizing of education. *Leading the Way* is that. In fact, it is the only lengthy published account of

a pioneer of American physical education as it was being made and married to higher education as a profession for women. We also sensed that the book would appear as part labor of love, part struggle. It does. Professor Spears, who directly encountered the Homans' legacy as a graduate student and as Director of Physical Education at Wellesley College, respects and admires her subject. She presents Homans as an educational *grand dame*, a woman who possessed a "forward" view of curriculum, who molded a "cohesive" professional community, and who devised a "unique" approach to what became a "superb" professional education. Apparent also is Spears' struggle (intellectual and methodological) with and against Homans. *Leading the Way* brings in to focus two related, locational issues which all historians face: the matter of author-subject distance and that of uncovering the context and the range of meanings of one's life and work.

Leading the Way is not a biography of the life of Amy Morris Homans (1848-1933). Homans did not want a biography, and she essentially insured that one could not be written: she requested that her personal papers be destroyed after her death! Relying on papers from Homans' benefactor and aunt, interviews, institutional records, and contemporary journals, Professor Spears relates "the story of Homans' struggles to gain the acceptance of physical education as a profession for women" and how she approached that mission (p. 7). For Homans, this mission began in 1869 when she went to Wilmington, North Carolina, to help her aunt conduct schools. There Homans met Mary Hemenway, the Boston philanthropist-reformer with whom she was to work for the next twenty-five years.

The Homans-Hemenway relationship is the pivotal one in *Leading the Way*. The two women, whom Spears places in the community of American Victorian social reformers, returned to Boston in 1876 and pursued several reform enterprises. Gradually, however, Hemenway focused on "improving the lives of Boston's school children" (p. 15), a goal to which both women linked the body, the "temple of God." Consequently the training of bodies became that "something" which "would lift the life of the masses to a higher level of health and vigor, . . . a more rational, self-controlled way of living," according to Homans (p. 17). Their only question-and this appears never to have been much of a question-was which of the prevailing "systems" was most appropriate for children and, eventually, for women. After a lengthy, and apparently not entirely unbiased, comparison of physical training programs, Hemenway and Homans committed themselves to the gymnastics originated by Ling.

The content of physical training settled, the two women pursued the rest of their agenda. Hemenway and Homans worked through, and probably on, the Boston School Committee to get Ling gymnastics into the schools. They arranged the 1889 Conference on Physical Training, ostensibly as a forum for general discussions among "experts." They launched the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics (BNSG), a teacher training institution that would prepare the teachers of Swedish gymnastics. Spears pursues neither the timing of nor any other relationships among these acts, all of which occurred in 1889, but one

cannot dismiss the possibility that they may have been parts of an ideological political course set by the two women to shape, or reshape, educational reforms in Boston. BNSG, which would train the teachers, opened in the fall of 1889, just as the Boston School Committee had recommended the adoption of the Swedish system. The Conference, which clearly put this system on display, occurred in November, just after one Committee member had challenged the recommendation.

Questions remain about the Hemenway-Homans program for physical training in Boston, but Spears establishes two important points. The 1889 Conference put Homans into a position of authority in the emerging field of physical education, and BNSG became the Hemenway-Homans base of operation. Homans, obviously more than just the translator and administrator of Hemenway's plans, intended to make it the nation's "leading normal school of gymnastics" (p. 42). How Homans developed BNSG as a unique physical education institution and what the results and her distinctive stamp were consume three-quarters of the book. Homans brought professors from MIT and Harvard to teach science, social science, and pedagogical theory courses, and she gradually expanded the students' clinical experiences and their physical activity program. She admitted students only on probation, a practice that allowed her to weed out those who could not or would not meet her high standards. The standards derived from her view of womanliness, which meant physical vigor, strength, intelligence, hard work, loyalty, executive and academic ability, impeccable manners, and—as she borrowed from Shakespeare—a voice "ever soft, gentle, and low" (p. 114). Finally, Homans carefully placed her graduates in positions where they could affect and live out the conception of profession that she accepted, one that asked "what can I give" (P. 76).

All of this, and more, according to Spears, made BNSG and Homans unique within the evolving field of physical education. But Homans had not yet completed her work: BNSG was not affiliated with a four-year liberal arts college. After Hemenway died in 1894, Homans searched for an academic institution with which to merge BNSG and "create a rigorous undergraduate program in the liberal arts and sciences as a sound basis for an advanced or graduate program in physical education" (p. 86). By 1909, this project, too, drew to a close. In that year BNSG became the Department of Hygiene and Physical Education at Wellesley College, and the graduate program that she had proposed became a reality in 1923.

As Spears describes these and other endeavors that Homans considered important in establishing physical education as an acceptable and meaningful profession for women and as she fleshes out Homans at work, she is really at her best. This task, obviously, is the labor of love. The reader can almost "see" this diminutive but authoritative "lady" addressing her students, checking for white gloves, helping to select dresses, and writing letters of recommendation and advice! Homans' sense, and practical translation, of the moral superiority of women fills these pages. Yet, it may be this same sense that causes Spears some

difficulty; she does not quite penetrate Homans' armor, her aura of moral superiority. The reader is able to see Homans at work, to know what she did, but one is less able to understand her and her efforts in their full context.

Such an understanding may require questions in addition to those that Spears asks. Why did Homans and Hemenway ultimately focus on women rather than children-especially when they never really graduated "just" teachers-and why did Homans expect her students to become administrators? Was *profession as service* just another interpretation of noblesse oblige or white woman's burden, or was it also an expression of female autonomy and authority? How did Homans fashion what may have been a unique conception of womanliness, one that both incorporated and countered some aspects of contemporary thought? Did she really take "risks" as she encountered "possibilities"; or, because hers was an "unchartered" world, was she defining the possibilities and the rules and, in the process, doing the "unwomanly" thing of etching relations with contemporaries-by outwitting, ignoring, or usurping-such as Sargent and Hill?

To ask answers to these and other questions is perhaps to ask too much of a "first" book about this pioneering woman, especially since much of the primary evidence no longer exists and since the secondary literature from which Professor Spears could draw is insufficient. Perhaps, too, this reviewer and the author have different conceptions of what "the story" is that historians need to tell. Certainly Professor Spears has examined her evidence judiciously, even if not in full ensemble or in response to all of the questions. Just as certainly, what she does tell us about Amy Morris Homans and the beginnings of professional education for women is significant. *Leading the Way* is an intriguing, meaningful addition to, and can be read in conjunction with, works like Barbara Miller Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women* (1985) and Sheila Fletcher's *Women First* (1984). As did Amy Morris Homans nearly a century ago, Betty Spears has led the way; she has provided a strong base upon which others can build. The next generation should do so well.