Spring 2010

Review of Louise Pound: Scholar, Athlete, Feminist Pioneer and Louise Pound: The 19th Century Iconoclast Who Forever Changed America's Views about Women, Academics and Sports

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In his preface to Marie Krohn’s biography of Louise Pound, Robert Cochran explains that Pound’s life as a subject is “big enough” to accommodate both Krohn’s biography and his own. He is being gracious, but readers of Great Plains Quarterly should not be fooled—Cochran’s biography of the distinguished University of Nebraska English professor and folklorist is far better than Krohn’s. In need of a thorough editing and a careful proofreading, Krohn’s book consists largely of over-long quotations and summaries unassimilated into her own overarching interpretation of the life of her subject. Several chapters, for instance, consist of little more than summarized and quoted material from Robert Knoll’s admirable history of the University of Nebraska, Prairie University (1995). While relying too much on authority in some instances, in others she reads Pound’s mind, telling us, for instance, that Pound “no doubt” judged university chancellor Edgar Burnett as “an unworthy administrator.”

In many respects, Cochran’s fine book is an intellectual biography, making Pound’s keen mind its central subject. Like Pound, Cochrane practices folklore in an English department (in his case, the University of Arkansas). His parallel experience makes him an ideal interpreter of Pound’s intellectual achievements. Most literary historians who write biographies currently style them as “cultural biographies,” in which each chapter foregrounds and theorizes a particular historical or cultural context of the biographical subject. Cochrane instead dives right in to a briskly paced—and engaging—chronological narrative, starting with a brief family history and the arrival of Pound’s parents in Nebraska. Subtly, however, he is laying the groundwork for an incisive analysis of Pound’s major scholarly achievements: her articles and book on the history of ballads, her work collecting and publishing folklore, and her work on American language and dialect.

This may sound like dull stuff, but Cochran displays the same dry wit he attributes to Pound, and he situates her intellectual achievements and the controversies they sometimes engendered in relation to Pound’s personal character as developed in the social and cultural milieu of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lincoln, Nebraska. In particular, Cochran focuses on Pound’s paradoxical class position as inflecting her approach to scholarly questions.
Her mother founded the Lincoln chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and her father was a judge. In Lincoln, she was thus “to the manor born.” When she traveled outside of Lincoln, however, she was an upstart Westerner and outsider, and a woman to boot. Cochran thus locates a persistent “insider/outside oscillation” across the long decades of her career.

In his tightly integrated reading of Pound’s entire life, Cochran finds this dynamic informing not just Pound’s considerable achievements as “scholar,” but also in the two other categories listed in his subtitle, “athlete, feminist pioneer.” One might imagine a book focusing solely on Pound’s astonishing athletic achievements, but Cochran makes it clear that for the fiercely competitive Pound athletics and scholarship were inextricable. Her tennis racket accompanied her to Chicago for summer graduate work, as well as to Germany, where she earned her doctorate in only a year. Despite this competitiveness, which led her to criticize other women for being “sissies” when they chose recreational play over competitive athletics, Pound dedicated herself to mentoring other women academics and increasing educational opportunities for women. And she did this all while anchored in her birthplace, Lincoln, Nebraska, even when opportunities (and probably better pay and better working conditions) were open to her elsewhere.

Both Krohn and Cochran express dismay that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Pound has been known primarily as the object of novelist Willa Cather’s passionate crush when the two women were students at the University of Nebraska. As both Cochran and Krohn point out, Pound’s voice is entirely absent from this episode (the surviving tortured love letters are Cather’s), and the episode was more important in Cather’s life than in Pound’s. Fair enough. However, Krohn’s treatment of sexuality is profoundly confused, while Cochran essentially punts, thus missing an opportunity to add another layer of complexity to his astute analysis of Pound’s life and career. His characterization of Pound as “homosocial in her feelings and celibate in her actions” is reasonable and perhaps accurate, but it represents a flat view of the complex nature of romantic love and erotic experience. Because Pound did not marry a man and left no documented traces of a romantic relationship with a person of either gender, Cochran proceeds as if sexuality has no relevance for Pound’s life. But what of the ways that others perceived Pound, an unmarried woman who was both a scholar and a competitive athlete, and the consequences of those perceptions for her career? If there is room for two book-length studies of Pound, perhaps there is room for a third that will tackle such questions.

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