Ladies of inequality

Janet Browne

Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood. By Cynthia Eagle Russett. Harvard University Press: 1989. Pp. 245. \$25, £15.95.

DESPITE the racy title, *Sexual Science* is a serious book about a serious subject. Cynthia Eagle Russett is professor of history at Yale University, and author of a number of studies on the relations between science and society in nineteenth-century America. Previously, she has focused on the way that non-scientists absorbed the implications of darwinism and the idea of thermodynamic equilibrium.

In this new book, she turns to a more complicated intermingling of worlds and takes a long, hard look at nineteenth-century science itself in order to chart the diverse and often inconsistent views that were expressed in both Britain and North America about the physical and social state of women. Many readers will perhaps be grateful that no modern axes are publicly ground, although the author is fully conversant with the latest work in womens' studies. But this does not mean that her story is a happy one: on the contrary, it fully justifies her claim that scientific work on sex differences during the Victorian period was neither unbiased nor value-free.

Philosophers, scientists, social theorists and the ordinary people in the nineteenth-century streets were all united in their belief that women were significantly different from men. Eagle Russett describes how these simple beliefs about basic biology were turned into major scientific concepts. The first section of the book, primarily following the work of Stephen J. Gould on the mismeasurement of skulls, is concerned with the way obvious anatomical differences were interpreted. The anthropological system of measuring skulls was used by biologists to show that the size of the female brain case was smaller than that of males (despite considerable evidence to the contrary), a conclusion that was thought to confirm the mental inferiority of women. Similarly, the popular science of phrenology codified all sorts of differences in the mental faculties of men and women.

These structural observations were

supported by a wide range of physiological findings. Taking up one of the great nineteenth-century achievements in the study of physiology, biologists such as Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson defined men as 'katabolic' entities, metabolically active, and women as 'anabolic',

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passive and constructive. On another intellectual plane, Darwin worked strenuously to answer the question of why women were not as hairy as men — presumably fingering his own patriarchal beard as he did so.

Evolutionists began to think that women were 'undeveloped' men, arrested on the way to some supposed better state. Doctors found that women were more 'nervous' than the opposite sex, prone to a whole range of mental diseases that did not afflict men (Eagle Russett misses the chance here to talk about hysteria — literally, a mental state caused by disorders of the womb and by definition found only in women).

Sexual Science is particularly good in explaining the idea of a division of labour that so clearly lies behind all these statements of difference. Human bodies were thought to mirror the body politic. Henry Maudsley and others in Britain and the United States insisted that the natural economy of the female body could not accommodate both brains and babies: the 'New Woman' of the 1880s and 1890s was upbraided for over-developing her mind to the detriment of her role as a mother (probably, as Edward Clark darkly intimated, women were graduating from college with undeveloped ovaries). Directives from the professional scientific

community bombarded educationalists, demanding that they should avoid over-specialization in girls' tuition for the sake of the future of the human race. All the fears that Eagle Russett rather grandiloquently calls the "cosmic nightmare" of the closing years of the century came to rest on the idea that women without children were betraying their natural biological role.

Yet Eagle Russett leaves the pursuit of interlocking turn-of-the-century themes such as degeneration and eugenics to others: her interests expressly lie in mapping the construction of a particular view of women rather than in its possible consequences. Within this particular view, it ought also to be said that Eagle Russett is class-specific. Her book is concerned only with middle-class women. There is no indication of whether scientists had any comparable theories about working-class women, or whether the mass of working people was beyond scientific concern. Equally, one wonders what effect Queen Victoria had on the theories of

men who thought women were not made to rule. Moreover, apart from a passing reference to the 'Hottentot Venus', a famous fairground exhibit in Napoleonic times, women of diverse racial origins are not discussed. It would have been illuminating to have some parallels, if any, drawn with the state of science and society in France, for example.

But this is a useful text, full of interesting ideas and pertinent examples. It will add considerably to our understanding of worlds that have gone before. □

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