

## Women in Science

*Hypatia's Heritage uncovers the important role women have played in the evolution of scientific thought.*

BY KATHERINE WHITE

### Hypatia's Heritage A History of Women in Science from Antiquity through the Nineteenth Century

by Margaret Alic  
Beacon Press, 1986. Paperback \$9.95

There persists the notion that women are incapable of scientific creativity. A dangerous misconception in a world dominated by science and technology. To label women incapable of the kinds of achievements

## Books

our culture values most indicates the contempt this culture continues to hold for women. Further, it robs many women of the confidence and the opportunity to use their natural talents to create a better world. Historians, by omitting or misrepresenting the accomplishments of women, have perpetuated the myth of female inferiority. Margaret Alic's book, *Hypatia's Heritage*, counters this perspective and gives to of importance before Marie Curie. One of the great mathematicians, astronomers, and philosophers of her day, she is deserving of her place in history, but has been remembered more for the circumstances of her death than the quality women the esteem to which their history entitles them.

Alic's well-documented research chronicles women's involvement in scientific discovery throughout the evolution of western civilization. Exploring the lives and work of individual women during each successive period of history, Alic reveals not only the nature of their contributions to science but the social and intellectual climate in which they worked.

Although societies varied in their response to women's participation in academics, women have suffered intellectual oppression since the rise of patriarchy. Many societies denied women any access to education. Others permitted women to be educated, but devalued or discredited their achievement. Often, for reasons of propriety, personal safety, or to insure that their work be taken seriously, women published under male pseudonyms. *Hypatia's Heritage* uncovers the important role women have played in the evolution of scientific thought despite these obstacles to achievement and to future recognition.

The book owes its title to Hypatia of Alexandria, a fifth century scientist often recognized by historians as the only female scientist of her work.

*The last pagan scientist in the western world,*

*her violent death coincided with the last years of the Roman Empire. Since there were to be no significant advances in mathematics, astronomy or physics anywhere in the West for another 1000 years, Hypatia has come to symbolize the end of ancient science.*

Anne Conway, a seventeenth century naturalist of singular importance, was not so fortunate as to be considered of symbolic interest to historians. Her writings literally laid the groundwork for the development of modern evolutionary theories, yet she has been all but forgotten. For reasons of propriety her name was omitted from the title page of her most important treatise. The work was subsequently attributed to her editor, Francis van Helmont, despite the objections of Conway's contemporaries. Anne Conway's story is not unique. "She was in some respects the archetypal woman scientist, a member of the aristocracy, she embarked on a rigorous course of self-education, made her contributions to science and was forgotten."

Among the many other forgotten women of science rediscovered in this book are: Ada Lovelace, nineteenth century mathematician whose partner, Charles Babbage, was given full credit for inventing the forerunner to the modern computer; Lady Mary Montegu, eighteenth century feminist who introduced the small-pox vaccine to Europe; Emilie Chatelet, influential eighteenth century mathematical philosopher, remembered instead for her love affair with the poet, Voltaire; and Trotula, one of the most renowned physicians and medical scholars of the Middle Ages, written out of medical history in the early twentieth century by men who did not believe her work could have been done by a woman.

As Alic stresses, "Because historians have been unable to accept the accomplishments of women, feminists are forced to reaffirm repeatedly the historical validity of Trotula and other women scientists." Our history is being rewritten and women are discovering a heritage rich in intellectual creativity and courage. Such discoveries undo the misconceptions of the present and free us to lay claim to a better future. For this reason *Hypatia's Heritage* is not just a book for and about women of science, it is a book for every person interested in the possibilities that a new understanding of the past has to offer.

(Ed. note: Margaret Alic teaches at Portland State University. She will appear at A Woman's Place Bookstore to autograph her book on January 9, 5-7 p.m.) ●

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