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**From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women's  
Rights in Gilded Age America  
by Kimberly A. Hamlin**

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**REVIEW**

In the first chapter of *From Eve to Evolution*, Kimberly A. Hamlin, Associate Professor of History and American Studies at Miami University, explains what it meant to be male and female and the origin of life, before the introduction of Darwinian evolutionary theory. "For generations, the legacy of Eve's secondary creation, sin, and subsequent curse shaped church doctrine, public life, and popular culture, informing individual's images of themselves and their ideas about what was possible for women and men" (p.25). She explores the influence of the Biblical Adam and Eve story on the social, political and cultural life of people in nineteenth-century America and argues how, based on the Bible, man is assigned as the head of the household and nation and woman is described as subordinate and a temptress. Evolutionary theory offered an alternative to the Adam and Eve story and after generations of Eve providing the ultimate justification for female subordination, late nineteenth-century female activists embraced Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, welcoming a new and scientific gender paradigm.

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The second chapter begins with the biography and life achievements of Helen Hamilton Gardener, a freethinking feminist and a pioneer in women's suffrage. The chapter explores the status of science and what was meant by science during the late nineteenth century, and its relation to women. During the final third of the nineteenth century, many women engaged with science because of the "popularity of Charles Darwin and the questions his work raised about the practice of science and the biology of sex differences" (p.60).

Next, the biography and work of Antoinette Brown Blackwell is discussed. She was one of the earliest and most prolific advocates of women's engagement with science whose revolutionary ideas challenged masculine science (the science conducted by men for men without including accurate studies of women). According to Blackwell, "if one really wanted to learn about women, one must turn to women themselves" (p. 62).

At the beginning of twentieth century there was a dramatic increase in the number of women attending college. The subsequent discussions about women's eligibility for higher education sparked heated public debates. Here the chapter explores debates and controversies about women's suitability for higher education, as many believed that women could, or should, not enter higher education because menstruation decreases their mental capacity and energy. Finally the chapter focuses on the debates over brain size and structure and how Gardener refuted the gendered brain differences proposed by public opinion as well as anti-feminist scientists of that time.

According to the book, in the nineteenth century, the medical community and ordinary people believed that pregnancy was a kind of disease to be endured. In the third chapter, Hamlin discerns how the Darwinian evolutionary theory provided new vocabulary for understanding animal and plant kingdoms, which led to the appreciation of reproduction as a natural process and pregnancy as healthy and women's most important contribution to the evolutionary process. In addition, feminists of that time began comparing people with animals in the light of evolutionary science, drawing the conclusion that women are able to pursue their own intellectual and professional interests equal to men. Therefore, in the nineteenth century a discussion over motherhood, its definition, scope and limitations began. The chapter introduces the women who were inspired by evolutionary theory and the close relationship between humans and animals, and how the rethinking of the home and the workplace enabled mothers to work outside the home. The Darwinian evolutionary cosmology "allowed women to reimagine the relationship between husband and wife, mother and children, leading to demands for fit pregnancy, the equitable distribution of domestic labor, and for some, the entrance of women and mothers into the paid workforce" (p.127).

The fourth chapter deals with the evolutionary concept of 'female choice' (which is defined as a female's primary control over reproduction), and the wide reverberation of female choice among feminists in the beginning of twentieth century. Feminists concluded that if women could support themselves economically, they would select better partners and everyone would be better off, as those feminists believed "female inequality was cultural not natural, that women at one point reigned supreme, and that women's subjugation happened when they were focused to enter into marriage for survival" (p.145). This argument over female choice even led feminists to conclude that women are superior to men. In addition, the female choice which is derived from Darwin's theories of natural and sexual selection supported birth control movements, the secularization of feminist thought and the growth of sexology.

*From Eve to Evolution* shows how feminism is indebted to evolutionary science. Darwinian theory inspired women's rights activists to shift from arguments about gender equality to arguments for acknowledging gender differences in a constructive way. "Evolutionary science allowed women to contemplate a world free from gendered biblical restrictions; to ponder sex differences in terms of animals, variety, and change; and to reimagine their bodies and their role in reproduction in an evolutionary, as opposed to biblical, context" (p.17). The book shows that Darwin's theory of evolution allowed the expansion of feminism and was a basis for the growth of the movement, as without it, changing gender inequality seems nearly impossible and the feminist movement would have probably been unsuccessful. Moreover, Hamlin claims that "Darwinian evolution helped shape the development of modern science because Darwin's theories popularized the potential of scientific inquiry and inspired public debate about what exactly counted as science, a field that had previously been considered in line with Christian teachings" (p.16).

This book is very well written and the reader will enjoy it and find it very interesting. Finally, it should be noted that *From Eve to Evolution* is a valuable volume for both historians and evolutionary scientists to understand the impact of evolutionary science on social movements and a must for any feminist to learn how science helped the movement.