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Evelyne Diebolt, ed., *Dictionnaire biographique: Militier au XXe siècle: Femmes, féminismes, Eglises et société*. Paris: Michel Houdiard Editeur, 2009. 348 pp. Bibliography and index. 28€ (pb.) ISBN 978-2-35692-015-7.

Review by Siân Reynolds, University of Stirling.

This agreeably-produced book contains biographical entries on 126 twentieth-century French women who have, in the editor's words, "taken initiatives and been active, as volunteers or paid workers, in the life of associations"—namely pressure groups or campaigns, mostly outside the world of formal politics.

Coverage of such an ill-defined field is of course impossible in a single volume — and this one is very selective: see below. But although the range of Evelyne Diebolt's collection cannot be compared with that of the multi-volume "Dictionnaire Maitron", familiar to all historians of the French left and labour movements, the editorial influence of that exemplary reference work is visible. The entries, alphabetically arranged, start with a brief definition, including in most cases the exact date and place of the subject's birth and death. And every entry ends, on the Maitron model, with a very useful and up-to-date bibliography listing both archives and published sources. Unusually for biographical dictionaries, this one also contains an index, helpfully identifying where the many associations mentioned turn up in the text, and listing other figures who do not have individual entries. And it begins with a quick aide-memoire of all the entries, making it easy to consult.

Although there are fourteen contributors, some have been called on for only one or two entries. The leading authors are Sylvie Fayet-Scribe, Renée Gérard and Nicole Fouché, Magali Della Sudda, and above all Evelyne Diebolt herself, who was responsible for over seventy entries. Authorship is a clue to the rather particular range of subjects covered: readers should not take literally the wide spectrum suggested by the book's subtitle. Diebolt is a specialist on the Mouvement Jeunes Femmes (MJF), an association of Protestant women founded in 1947 which was particularly active in the post-war campaigns for changing the French laws on abortion, contraception and rape. Most of her articles concern women in this group. A smaller group, tackled by Della Sudda, concerns Catholic women, particularly members of the Ligue Patriotique des Françaises (LPDF) a broadly conservative movement founded in the wake of the Dreyfus affair. Another set of entries covers women graduates in the Association des femmes diplômées des universités (AFDU) under its various titles, on which Gérard and Fouché are specialists. A fourth identifiable sub-group, handled by Fayet-Scribe, consists of archivists and librarians. And there are inevitably some names which are hard to classify, included for some particular aspect of their activity. Many, though not all, the figures here had a religious background, and the Protestant group predominates. Most, too, were from well-off, or at any rate well-educated milieux, and very few are still alive, so the age range chiefly concerns the earlier generations of the century.

Hardly any famous women are included — the editor's chief aim was obviously to shed light on historically obscure individuals. A handful of names are, all the same, instantly recognizable: Simone Veil, Germaine Tillion, and Luce Irigaray (apparently included for her research into "la spiritualité féminine"). Others will be known to historians of feminism: Marguerite Durand, founder of the library; journalist Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix, recently brought out of unjustified obscurity by Karen Offen, who contributes her entry here;

committeewoman Julie Siegfried; and trade unionist Andrée Butillard, for instance. In the context of the book, some of these 'star' choices seem rather arbitrary, since it is possible to find biographical material elsewhere on the better-known names.

But the great majority of entries are on women absent from the indexes of books on twentieth-century France. It is the editor's contention, explained in the twelve-page introduction, that the 1901 law on associations encouraged several generations of women to become active in public life: they were able to network, learn public speaking, and form pressure groups with particular ends in view. Diebolt has long worked in this field, one also explored by the periodical *Vie sociale*, but still rather under-represented in mainstream histories.^[1] The majority of the subjects of this dictionary devoted themselves to philanthropy, health care, or social intervention, and were engaged in what might be called parallel or alternative politics, both before and after French women had the formal right to vote: peace movements, feminist groups, reform campaigns, family planning. Many of them were "militants" across several movements.

Packed with information as it is, I find this book a bit difficult to characterize in a review. The entries do not conform to any particular conventions about length or content. There are some individually fascinating trajectories, followed in considerable detail, and some very brief summaries. For example the single-page entry on Eugénie Cotton (1881-1967), one time directrice of the ENS of Sèvres, makes it hard to see quite why she is included, whereas the longest article in the dictionary—a ten-page entry on Madeleine Tric (1902-1998) does fit the criteria, since she was active in MJF and campaigned for birth control; but it also includes a great deal of family information more suitable to a full-length biography. Some entries are expanded versions of index file cards, with mere lists of associations in which the subject played some part, while others clearly represent years of research. On balance though, the upside of restricting overall numbers means that most entries carry more information than reference works usually allow.

All biographical dictionaries are selective, and while this one can certainly be seen as pretty idiosyncratic, both in its choices and in its handling of the stories it tells, it is best regarded as a contribution and supplement to histories of French feminism in the twentieth century. Not everyone will agree with Diebolt's suggestion that taken together these lives represent "un féminisme à la française", a controversial formula in itself. But she is right to point out that the various women's associations were concerned with "the betterment of everyday life", in a political culture which until fairly recently was quite hostile territory. Not a few of their stories are marked by frustration, obstacles, fatigue, illness and disappointment, as their efforts were either marginalized or subsumed into state structures, which helps to explain their comparative invisibility. A good example is the career of Anna Hamilton (1864-1935) a doctor who for many years directed the Protestant Maison de Santé in Bordeaux, and created a diploma for trained women "garde-malades" who would be "equal to the doctor", by specializing in forms of nursing care. State registration of nurses in 1922 to which her school was obliged to conform, took a very different path, and she became a rather forgotten figure.

Some of the uneven features of the entries can turn out to have fruitful side-effects. True, there is sometimes too much disconnected information about a subject's family (do we need to know that one woman's mother insisted on being buried in Brittany, since no further explanation or reference is given?). But a wealth of hidden networking and social connections is detectable simply by finding out what a subject's married and paternal surnames were, and how many relatives were involved in politics or associations. An example is the Landry family of whom the radical party politician Adolphe is perhaps the best known within standard histories. Here, separated by the alphabet, we find his daughter, lawyer Hélène Landry-Campinchi, and his sisters Marguerite Pichon-Landry, Marie Long-Landry and Madeleine Thuillier-Landry, two of them doctors, all of them energetic committeewomen and campaigners for women's rights.

The index moreover contains upwards of 700 names of individuals and associations, creating a rich interlocking pattern of activity, and offering often serendipitous checkpoints for anyone doing research across the rather ill-defined field of “women’s associations” in France. Despite some quibbles then, this is a surprisingly handy, detailed and user-friendly reference work: on a personal note, I was delighted to find an entry on Marie Bonnet, a Dreyfusard associate of the Scottish intellectual Patrick Geddes, my previous efforts to find any biographical information about her having failed.

NOTES

[1] Cf E. Diebolt, ed., *Un siècle de vie associative: quelles opportunités pour les femmes?* (Paris: Femmes et associations, 2002 – conference proceedings), and her contributions to Geneviève Poujol and Madeleine Romer, *Dictionnaire biographique des militants, XIXe-XXe siècles: de l'éducation populaire à l'action culturelle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996) with which the present book has some minor overlaps. See also a whole series of numbers of the periodical *Vie Sociale* (CEDIAS, Musée Social) during the 1980s and 1990s, devoted to the history of women’s movements with special reference to what might be called social work and the caring professions, in particular Special No. 11/12 (1984) *Mouvements de femmes (1919-1940) Guide des sources documentaires*, edited by Françoise Blum, Colette Chambelland and Michel Dreyfus.

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