

## She Wanted It All, and Got it

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LUCY SPRAGUE MITCHELL *The Making of a Modern Woman*. By Joyce Antler. Illustrated. 436 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$29.95.

LUCY SPRAGUE MITCHELL was the founder and longtime administrator of the Bank Street College of Education, the author of innovative children's books, a dedicated teacher and distinguished theorist on progressive schooling. This unusually accomplished daughter of Victorianism and pioneer of modernism, however, never took the measure of her own worth in professional achievements alone. Instead, she judged herself as a woman who tried to combine an independent career with the personal fulfillment of marriage and motherhood when few made the attempt. She offered her own life as her most outstanding creation in an autobiographical meditation written during the 1950's, but by then hardly anyone was listening.

The situation was quite different at the turn of the century when Lucy Sprague graduated with the class of 1900 from Radcliffe College. The question of marriage and career consumed educated and ambitious young women of that era. They heard the feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman condemn matrimony for denying wives the opportunity of self-realization and watched the legendary Jane Addams show the world how much good a woman of independence, energy and imagination might do. Few then believed that the conflicting obligations of love and work could be reconciled, and never had "bachelor maids" been more in fashion. Sprague had watched her own mother descend into depression and illness in a marriage that denied her freedom of mind and spirit. Having sheltered herself as a child from an autocratic father by retreating into a private world of books and fantasy, she was in no hurry to put herself at risk with another man. She left Cambridge for the University of California at Berkeley to "study the situation of women students" and quickly became the first dean of women in the institution's history.

Aristocratic in bearing, intelligent and fun-loving, Dean Sprague found herself drawn to Prof. Wesley Clair Mitchell, a young economist she had known since her undergraduate days who had been in love with her for four years. Yet in the fall of 1911 Sprague left as planned to study with New York settlement workers whose dedication to practical urban reform she hoped to emulate. Wesley Mitchell pursued her through a candid exchange of letters that patiently and painfully examined the classic dilemma of a woman's resistance to intimacy based on her simultaneous and contradictory fear of subordination and contempt for any man to whom she does not feel inferior.

Lucy Sprague agreed to marry Wesley Mitchell, but insisted they move to New York, although he had no academic appointment at the time. They established themselves in Greenwich Village, where they lived for three decades, and Wesley Mitchell joined the economics department of Columbia University. They had two children and adopted two more from local foundling homes, a gesture then considered newsworthy. A family inheritance and the luxury of an academic schedule with long summers off made it easier

for both of them to have flourishing, fulfilling lives. They were part of a larger generational group of progressive intellectuals and activists who believed in the capacity of science and education to shape human conduct and reform society's ills.

The Mitchells tried to live and work in accordance with their ideals. He moved back and forth between academia and government, honored in his profession for theoretical work on economic planning. She opened her Greenwich Village town house to Caroline Pratt's progressive, experimental Play School which became the City and Country School. The curriculum embodied many of her own ideas for encouraging spontaneity in children. She privately endowed the programs of testing, training and research in public schools and settlements which later formed the basis of the Bank Street School's instructional philosophy. She wrote the "Here and Now Story Book," published in 1921, a classic collection of short stories inspired by everyday routines and intended to reinforce developing levels of cognition and socialization in children. Perhaps the best known of her students in the Bank Street writing program was Margaret Wise Brown, whose "Goodnight Moon" encompasses Mitchell's principles for children's stories.

This compelling first biography follows Lucy Sprague Mitchell's lead and makes her life, not her work, the center of its story. It is on the whole an affectionate portrait, enriched by what sometimes seems an oppressive self-demand, traces of which she left behind in letters, journals and published writings. By this intimate assessment, however, she is not flawless. She often seems to intellectualize her emotions and is not as happy as she claims; she and her husband do not always communicate perfectly; her children do not get enough attention; they do not think well of themselves or of her. Meanwhile, at work, she can be imperious with her money and egotistical about her opinions. She feuds with colleagues and they resent her. JOYCE ANTLER, who teaches American studies at Brandeis University, scrupulously avoids judgments that are better left to the reader. Some may quarrel with her decision to focus the biography on the details of Mitchell's life rather than her work. How often do biographies of men hold them accountable for the successes of their wives and children, as well as their own? Mitchell's contributions to her field deserve more thorough elucidation and analysis. For example, how have Bank Street's theories held up over time?

To dwell on Mitchell's professional legacy, however, would have been to repeat the mistake of reviewers more than 30 years ago when she published her memoir, explicitly titled "Two Lives." Lucy Sprague Mitchell's valiant attempt to have a marriage, family and career is what makes her modern and interesting to general readers, many of whom are facing the same problems. This biography succeeds precisely because it lets us peer inside another woman's life and come away with a more sober assessment of our own.