

MARY NASH. Professor of Contemporary History at the UB

Out of the kitchen and into the classroom

Work of a pioneer

CARME VINYOLES
As a specialist in the history of women, Mary Nash has made a study of the role of education in the struggle for the recognition of women's rights.

—In 19th century Europe, the establishment of liberal states is associated with the expansion of public education. However, what role did women play in the new economic and political system?

—It represents an important step forward in that it signals the beginning of the end of the myth about the incompatibility of women and education. This was an obstinate concept that proved damaging to women both mentally and physically. It has to be said, though, that it was a change of mentality that, rather than questioning the gender hierarchy, reinforced it, in the sense that educating women was to make them better able to perform their traditional function as the perfect wife and housekeeper and thus maintain the division be-

Irish by birth, as a student in the 1960s at the Universitat de Barcelona (UB), Nash began her studies into the history of women in Spain, pitting her enthusiasm for the issue against the Franco regime's reluctance to pursue. Nevertheless, from Catalonia, she persevered, becoming the founding president of the Asociación Española de Investigación de Mujeres. In the following years, she also specialised in the history of social movements and diversity.

Today, she is professor of Contemporary History at the UB and director of the Grup d'Investigació Consolidat Multiculturalisme i Gènere. She is the author of *Mujeres Libres, 1936-1939* (Tusquets Editor, 1976); *Rojas* (Taurus, 1999) and *Mujeres en el mundo* (Alianza Editorial, 2004), among other books. Her work has been recognised with the award of the Medalla de Treball President Macià from the Generalitat.

tween the sexes at work. Nevertheless, this does not mean that this first step, which allowed women to escape illiteracy, would not bring others that would progressively lead to their emancipation.

—Your books cite a variety of contemporary voices critical of women's domestic role, especially from the writer Emília Pardo Bazán.

—Pardo Bazán, who was not scared to speak out, instigated an intense debate in the 1892 Congrés Pedagògic on the education of women by declaring that rather than education, women were subject to house training that promoted passivity, obedience and submission. I would also highlight the advanced views of Concepción Arenal, who defended women's intellectual capacity and maintained that their ignorance did not have an organic origin but rather was due to having no access to adequate education.

—She challenged the theory that inequality was natural?

—Exactly. What she did was

publicly reject the scientific arguments that justified the social subordination of women because of a supposed natural inferiority, as can be seen from her article 'La mujer del porvenir' that was published in 1869. Writers such as Pardo Bazán, Arenal or the journalist Carmen Karr, editor of the magazine *Feminal*, for example, champion, within the restrictive context of recognition for women beyond their role in the family sphere, full education and equality so that they can develop their potential for the benefit of society.



Mary Nash at the Facultat de Geografia i Història of the Universitat de Barcelona. / ROBERT RAMOS

–Could it be said that the **Institut Cultura i Biblioteca Popular de la Dona**, set up a hundred years ago by **Franческа Bonnemaison**, was a foundation stone in the establishment of Catalan feminism?

–Yes, what we call social and educational feminism, because, even though it had a political profile that was conservative, in that it promoted middle-class values, it eroded many cultural gender models. In the first place, it was a leading player in providing for the lower middle and working classes, modern

and rational quality education. It also defended the right of non-married women to qualified and remunerated work, thus breaking the masculine monopoly, and it used its contacts in the **Cambra de Comerç** and other organisations to find employment for its students, which also shows its capacity for management. At this time of economic and social change brought about by the process of modernisation at the beginning of the 20th century, the Institut carried out important work in incorporating women into public life. Later, the policies of the

Mancomunitat and the **Diputació**, would also contribute to the emergence of the first generation of young Catalan professionals. The step up from the domestic sphere to the professional sphere would be decisive in the struggle for achieving women's rights.

–**The anarchist organisation, Mujeres Libres, which was formed in 1936, spoke out against the sexist prejudices among its own members, despite the efforts made during the Republic.**

–The patriarchal culture was deeply rooted even in the work-

ing class movement and during this exceptional period we see how in clubs and social centres, women take on the task of teaching literacy to the uneducated so that, as Mercedes Comaposada put it, they could overcome, "the triple slavery of being ignorant, woman and producer". In 1937, the Generalitat took the first official step in the area of equal opportunities with the creation of the **Institut d'Adaptació Professional de la Dona**, which established equal treatment in training, salaries and work opportunities.