

Astride: Horses, Women, and a Partnership That Shaped America

Eliza McGraw

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Viewing movements toward women's equality through the lens of riding horses, Eliza McGraw's *Astride* is a charming history book.

At the turn of the twentieth century, just as horse-riding began to go out of fashion for society men, women entered the practice in ways that shocked Victorian sensibilities. The more brazen among them rejected sidesaddle riding; this way of “harking back to the Amazons classed riding astride into something unrestrained and aggressive,” McGraw notes. Herein, this peculiar tension is treated as but one articulation of the greater struggles between tradition and women's equality that came to characterize the era:

On horseback, women could be bigger, louder, faster, and stronger—all qualities riding already offered men.

About women from all backgrounds, this piquant sports and social history text celebrates a variety of experiences. Whether it's focused on “confusing” cowgirls, women breeding racehorses, circus performers, fights for the humane treatment of work horses, or horse-riding suffragettes, the book centers women who together rode “into a future that seemed to have more possibilities than ... imagined even a few years before.”

The book includes a wealth of historical photographs. Inez Milholland is pictured parading, proud and striking, through Washington, DC; transgressive performers Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane pose for their shows; and horses traipse through Central Park, carrying “high style” riders. A line from Emily Post indicates a turn toward “proper” riding, as does professional rider Belle Beach's contribution to *Vogue*. And while the book acknowledges that access to horses often required a degree of privilege, it takes pains to show where women without such means found their way in horse culture, too.

An esoteric but inviting history book, *Astride* covers feminist progress in the US via women's relationships to horses.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January / February 2025)

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