Preface

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In 1858, an article on the second annual exhibition of the Society of Female Artists appeared in the English Woman’s Journal. Noting that some two hundred ‘lady artists’ had contributed to the exhibition, the anonymous reviewer comments that ‘this Society affords a new industrial opening to women. It brings a class together, gives them esprit de corps, and forcibly draws the attention of the public to the number of those who follow art as a profession’. Not only did large numbers of women follow art as a profession but many pursued illustration as a career. Nineteenth-century women illustrators and cartoonists came about as the result of discussions I had with Pamela Gerrish Nunn about such significant but neglected Victorian illustrators as Florence Claxton, Mary Ellen Edwards, and Eleanor Vere Boyle. As we talked, we saw a need for a book on nineteenth-century women illustrators that would ‘forcibly’ draw the attention of readers to an underrepresented area of art and book history, we felt that such a study had been a long time coming, and we decided that this book should be a collaborative undertaking.

With Pamela’s encouragement, I sent out a call for essays on women illustrators of the long nineteenth century and was gratified to find that many accomplished scholars are currently working in this field and were keen to participate in the project. Once the proposals began to arrive, it became clear that we should divide up the field into areas of interest, including natural history illustration, periodical and book illustration, and cartoons and caricatures. In this way, we could show the range of women’s work in visual and print culture. It also became clear that women’s work in this field extended into the fin de siècle and the early years of the twentieth century, so we knew that the book would encompass Edwardian and some later illustrations which had been produced by women who were born in the nineteenth century but who worked mainly at the start of the twentieth.

With the aim of following in the footsteps of the English Woman’s Journal, Nineteenth-century women illustrators and cartoonists considers the important contribution that women
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artists made to the various forms and genres of illustration that flourished during the nineteenth century. Cartoonists are represented by Marie Duval, Florence Claxton, and Olive Allen Biller, though I have placed the chapter on Biller in the final part of this book, ‘Illustration at the fin de siècle’, since her work appeared in the early twentieth century. We are fortunate to be able to include many illustrations, thus providing a glimpse into the extensive world of Victorian women’s illustration. Many of the images are engravings, and so primarily black and white, but a few are in colour. We hope that both the monochrome pictures and the colour plates will evoke the vivid life that went into the creation of these memorable works.

Nineteenth-century women illustrators and cartoonists is divided into three sections, chronologically arranged and covering a specific branch of illustration in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each chapter presents a critical argument about an illustrator and her place in nineteenth-century print and visual culture. A common thread that runs through the book is a focus on each illustrator’s foundational or early work, which initiated her development as an artist. The aim of this book is to show, not simply their ubiquity, but the exceptionally high quality and cultural significance of women’s illustrations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

When the English Woman’s Journal reported on the exhibition of the Society of Female Artists in 1858, they were striking a blow for the inclusion of women in the critical field of the fine arts. When women artists produced drawings and engravings for periodicals and books throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, they were inscribing their perspective and creating a space in which women’s visual and print culture could grow and expand. We are the beneficiaries of these and so many other brave and diligent nineteenth-century women, and we offer this book in recognition of their esprit de corps, their struggles, and their lasting achievement.

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