1999

Unsentimental Reformer: The Life of Josephine Shaw Lowell by Joan Waugh (Review)

Jacob Dorn
Wright State University - Main Campus, jacob.dorn@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/history

Part of the History Commons

Repository Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact corescholar@www.libraries.wright.edu.
side of the pulpit each was on” (49). And in their own “Brush Colleges” of experience gained largely on the frontier, they learned to preach with “holy knock-em-down power.”

The Methodist system of organization and government, drawn directly from Wesley and the British, was infinitely expandable without loss of strong central control and thus uniquely suited to America. After the Revolution, the country was on the move and the Methodists moved with them—sometimes ahead of them, too. Although Wigger has acknowledged the unique role of Francis Asbury in the early history of Methodism, there is more to be said about the essential role played by Methodism’s “general superintendents” in directing, shaping, and defending the itinerant system. He does examine appropriately the role of the love feast, quarterly meeting, and camp meetings in shaping early Methodism. The discipline that was exercised by the denomination in these groups was, he says, “in harmony with the most cherished values of ordinary Americans” (102). This fact is certainly relevant to the emerging thesis in historical studies that following the Civil War, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, became the bearer of traditional southern culture and values. The Methodists enforced and supported the values and aspirations of republican America.

One of the most valuable aspects of this book is the careful presentation of primary sources that have gone into it. Wigger makes available to his readers a new glimpse of the journals, diaries, and records of early Methodists, and the quotations that he uses from them are not the ones that are ordinarily found. The endnotes fill fifty-nine pages; there is a valuable appendix outlining the growth of the Methodists from 1773–1810. There is a chapter on the Methodists and slavery, and one titled “Sisters and Mothers in Israel,” which makes a valuable contribution to expanding and improving body of literature on the role of Methodist women.

This is a book that will be useful in courses on American religion and of great interest to anyone engaged in the study of Methodism in America, lay and clergy alike. It is a book that will appeal to any informed reading public, well written and attractively presented with a number of plates of early Methodists. We are grateful to Professor Wigger for this impressive work.

James E. Kirby
Perkins School of Theology


Best known for her advocacy of “scientific charity” in the Gilded Age, Josephine Shaw Lowell (1843–1905) has been a handy subject for caricature. Many historians have seen that period’s reforms as elitist and sterile. To some students of social-welfare history, the movement to organize and rationalize charity has seemed designed primarily to “make the working class and the poor behave in acceptable ways, while denying them real benefits” (4). Lowell’s sometimes harsh rhetoric invites negative judgments.

Although Lowell stands among America’s leading reformers, Joan Waugh’s is the first comprehensive scholarly biography. This is surprising, given the maturity the field of women’s history has attained. Waugh believes this
neglect may be ascribed to Lowell’s alliance with patrician males and lack of identification with the poor women for whose welfare she claimed to work.

In a sophisticated analysis, Waugh rejects both the social-control thesis and the notion that Lowell represents a step backward from the achievements of women before the Civil War. Exploring Lowell’s entire life, not just charity reform in the Gilded Age, and placing it in changing historical contexts, Waugh presents a complex, sophisticated portrait.

The balance between private and public varies. Coverage of Lowell’s private life is rich through the Civil War years, revealing intellectual and social factors that would shape the adult. Waugh stresses her Brahmin family’s Unitarian, Transcendentalist, and perfectionist beliefs, unswerving abolitionism, and encouragement of women to step outside the “cult of domesticity.” In adulthood, Lowell’s public life was very much her life.

A widowed mother at war’s end, Lowell believed that her brother’s and husband’s battlefield deaths were a mandate for her to improve society. Her options limited by her gender and class, she turned to philanthropy, where she could offer leadership and wield power, and thus fulfill personal expectations nurtured by her antebellum experience, without challenging conventional gender roles. Moreover, the problems of poverty, crime, family dysfunction, and public health exacerbated by industrialization were intellectually stimulating to one with her background; and charity, properly understood, offered opportunities to participate in reform.

The centerpiece of Waugh’s analysis is Lowell’s charity work in New York from 1871 to her death. This work, she argues, is best understood as part of a profound transformation in which the “professional” social work of the Progressive era replaced the “amateur” volunteerism of the past. This transformation advanced by fits and starts, in both ideas and methods. Lowell’s insistence on improving the “character” of the poor and her appeal to the affluent to take a personal interest in them reflected older moral and religious traditions; her embrace of social science and encouragement of casework pointed toward the future.

Of all the organizations through which Lowell worked, she is best remembered for the Charity Organization Society of New York City (1882), which became the platform for her influence beyond New York. Waugh does not soft-pedal Lowell’s ideology. Lowell believed that eliminating poverty’s causes, not relieving suffering, was the proper aim of charity: nothing was worse than “indiscriminate almsgiving” that ignored the effects of aid on the recipient’s character and the interests of society. Watchwords like “organization, cooperation, and rationalization” justified policies that gave the COS a reputation for wanting to prevent charity.

Waugh deepens our understanding of this perspective, which many of Lowell’s socially liberal contemporaries shared. She makes it abundantly clear that Lowell sought primarily to remove the causes of distress, not control the poor; defended the right of women, children, and the disabled to assistance from society; crusaded against dehumanizing practices in public institutions; and tolerated the softening of her principles in their implementation. This is an intellectual biography of Lowell, however, and it offers little analysis of the actual consequences of charity reform among the needy or of their reactions to Lowell’s program.

Waugh’s argument that Lowell did not abandon her sex is persuasive. Though her primary public associations were with men, Lowell cultivated
female supporters and coworkers. She worked to increase poor women's economic independence, mentored young female reformers, and opened doors to leadership positions for middle-class women. In addition, her forays into politics, which grew out of her disgust with the nexus between political machines and the poor, rested on the assumption that women could exercise political power even without voting. Active herself in the civil-service movement and in municipal elections, she mobilized New York women to demand a higher standard of public morality and to utilize publicity, mass meetings, and lobbying as pressure on male voters. An advocate of women's suffrage, she believed that working-class women needed it more than elite women.

Waugh demonstrates that Lowell's intellectual curiosity and openness to disagreement enabled her to shift ground. She did so quite significantly, Waugh concludes, under the influence of Henry George's analysis of poverty, exposure to the labor movement (especially the struggles of female workers), and the Depression of 1893. In weighing the relative importance of personal and environmental causes of poverty, Lowell came to place greater emphasis on the environmental and to call more clearly for social justice for the working class. She never abandoned her belief in individual responsibility and "character" but turned increasingly to tenement reform, hours-and-wages issues, parks and playgrounds, and improvements in public health.

Lowell's final cause was anti-imperialism. When a war she supported to free Cuba turned into colonialism in the Philippines, she abhorred American policy as a betrayal of the liberated people and of national ideals. Finding the roots of Lowell's anti-imperialism in abolitionism, Waugh contends that it embodied not racist fears about assimilating "inferiors" but egalitarian convictions.

This work is sympathetic, but justifiably so. First, it is a badly needed corrective to one-dimensional accounts. Secondly, it is critical, frankly acknowledging Lowell's inconsistencies and the astringency of her approach to poverty. Among its many contributions, the greatest is that it bridges several generations of American reform, illuminating continuities and innovations in leadership, ideology, and method from the pre–Civil War world to the early Progressive era.

Jacob H. Dorn
Wright State University


Leo P. Hirrel captures the impact and essence of Calvinism's largest denominations, Congregationalists and Presbyterians, during the antebellum period of their transcendence. He argues that Calvinist theology must be placed in historical context if we are to understand its social reform rhetoric. He finds this to be particularly true of the New School theology (also known as New Haven theology) of Nathaniel William Taylor. Thus Hirrel defines the New School's purpose as reconciling the traditional Calvinist doctrine of original sin (depravity) with "a more rational religion prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (xi). New Haven theologians made reform rhetoric conform to theological concepts, and the doctrine of human depravity to fudge with what historians see as the nineteenth century's mood