

Priscilla Pope-Levison. *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era*. New York: New York University Press, 2014. Pp. ix, 270. \$49.00.

A beautifully written and well-crafted book, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* tells the story of remarkable women who built a wide variety of evangelistic, denominational, educational, and rescue work institutions between 1890 and 1920. These previously largely unknown women evangelists, who Priscilla Pope-Levison introduces to readers, worked in large cities and small towns across the North American continent. Instead of presenting these stories in a series of biographical portraits, which might easily have grown tiresome in its detail, the book is wisely organized in chapters arranged by the types of institution the women built. It was, after all, institution-building which set these Progressive Era women apart from their more famous evangelist predecessors of the early nineteenth century, like Jarena Lee and Harriet Livermore.

In addition to drawing contrasts with their forebears, Pope-Levison assiduously compares the 25 women in her study to one another—some more thoroughly than others—and notes their common struggles as well as what distinguishes them from one another. These women were far from a uniform lot. Denominational heritage, beliefs about sanctification, higher criticism, women's roles in the family and church, and race often distinguished them from one another. The most striking contrast in the book may very well be between Bishop Mary Lena Lewis Tate, arguably the first African American woman bishop in history, and Alma White, who published three books praising the Ku Klux Klan. With only two exceptions—Helen Sunday (Presbyterian) and Martha Moore Avery (Roman Catholic)—all the women featured in this book ran in the orbit of the American holiness movement (p. 13).

The book both celebrates women evangelists and portrays the “everyday tragic” (p. 109) dimensions of their lives. Several of these women, for example, had difficult marriages, and some divorced. The challenges they faced as they built institutions revealed some of them to be dictatorial in their approach to leadership. These women also largely failed to groom a next generation of women leaders to take their place; several chose men instead.

For this reviewer the most insightful chapter in the book was that which focused on women’s leadership in founding and building religious training schools. Long ignored by scholars who have focused instead on Bible institutes established by D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, and C. I. Scofield, the training schools featured in this book were all founded by women who trained thousands of women and men in Biblical studies for practical ministry in home and foreign mission outposts. Pope-Levison argues that these institutions differed substantially from those started by men. Rejecting a “separate spheres” argument for female domesticity—sometimes also advocated by male allies—the training schools described in this book did not fall prey to “increasing masculinization” (p. 113) but maintained strong female as well as male faculties and a co-educational learning environment for their students. In telling the stories of these institutions, Pope-Levison helps readers to understand the broader context by assessing how the schools weathered the changes in national educational trends (the rise of elite women’s colleges, vocational education in high schools, etc.).

The story of Methodist Iva May Durham Vennard and her founding of training schools in both St. Louis and Chicago is especially powerful for the way that she tenaciously overcame obstacles set in her path by denominational officials and rival Methodist schools. She was magnificently undaunted in establishing the nondenominational Chicago Evangelistic Institute in 1910 after denominational officials seized control of her school in St. Louis. It seems Vennard’s

Chicago Evangelistic Institute inherited her tenacity after her death and survived (as Vennard College) until 2008.

This book is an essential volume for scholars of late-nineteenth-century American religion, but it is valuable for a wider audience as well. This engagingly written book expands and challenges the standard story of Progressive Era evangelists or social gospel advocates who typically dominate the story of late-nineteenth-century American religion. The influence these women had on the generations that followed them is pointed out throughout the book but especially in the closing chapter, which demonstrates how various refrains from Aimee Semple McPherson's story were first composed by women a generation earlier. Students in contemporary colleges and seminaries learning about American religious history will find notes from their own songs in this book as well. *Building the Old Time Religion* is unequivocally not old fashioned.

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