
Ruth Bordin states clearly what she is about in the title of her book. She describes in an exciting and provocative way the “quest for power and liberty” by women who flocked to join the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) in the last decades of the nineteenth century. She traces the growth of the Union from its formative event, the Ohio Woman’s Crusade of 1873-74, through its rise during the eighties and nineties to become the largest and most powerful nineteenth-century woman’s organization, and then assesses its leveling-off period as the century closed. At each stage of development she carefully examines the reasons, both internal and external, for the course of development, giving the reader not merely a narrative description, interesting as that might be, but also placing the history of the W.C.T.U. within the larger historical context of the growing woman’s movement, the temperance reform impulse, and other significant social and political crosscurrents converging at this particular historical moment. In doing this, Bordin demonstrates her knowledge of the latest feminist scholarship as well as her familiarity with current research on the American temperance movement.

The phrase “the quest for power and liberty” comes from a statement by a British temperance worker, Margaret Parker, who captured what Bordin believes is the fundamental meaning of the Ohio Woman’s Crusade. In an 1883 article, Parker contended that women’s spontaneous praying demonstrations in saloons, aimed at forcing dealers to stop selling liquor, were, in Bordin’s words, “the major factor in changing the role of women in the American temperance movement and even in American society (p. 29).” “In England,” Margaret Parker had lamented, “we have had no such baptism of power and liberty.” In the language of the twentieth-century women’s movement, the Crusade was the consciousness-raising event which drew middle-class Evangelical Protestant women out of their homes and into the streets to join the fight against Demon Rum. These women defied custom and church teaching to venture from the private sphere into the public realm and, consciously
or unconsciously, into the feminist struggle. Perhaps the most important contribution Bordin makes in this volume is her recognition of the W.C.T.U. as a vehicle for woman's awakening to larger possibilities than those allowed her by the nineteenth-century "doctrine of the spheres" which decreed that woman must be pious, pure, domestic and independent. The W.C.T.U. in its first quarter-century re-shaped the image of woman, building on the powerful role of woman as mother in order to create a broader image of woman as independent, educated, and politically aware, one whose mothering capacity extended to the wider world beyond the home.

Through its assertive, talented leadership, its publications and national conventions, and its strong grass-roots organizing techniques, the Union taught a generation of American women skills which enabled them to affect the American political process. Women learned to speak publicly while arguing for Home Protection, W.C.T.U. president Frances Willard's term for woman suffrage in order to vote for Prohibition. They became adept at framing and shepherding a variety of bills through local, state and national assemblies, legislation ranging from prohibition measures to age of consent laws to acts providing for police matrons. They successfully fought for compulsory temperance instruction in the public schools, and employed one of their members, a lawyer, as a full-time lobbyist on Capitol Hill. W.C.T.U. women grappled with burning issues of their time, dealing with such controversial questions as the relationship between poverty and alcohol. Did alcohol abuse cause poverty, as temperance reformers had believed throughout much of the century, or could it be that bad working conditions, long hours, and low pay drove people to drink? During the 1880s, Union President Frances Willard began to state publicly that the long-accepted casual relationship between drunkenness and poverty was not so clear-cut. With the backing of her organization she began to call, gently but firmly, for systemic reforms which in turn led her to investigate a Christian socialist alternative to emerging industrial capitalism. Bordin details this investigation and the reaction of W.C.T.U. members to their leader's many challenges to the political, social and religious status quo. In a valuable section, Bordin also discusses the decline of the Union after Willard's death in 1898 when it ceased to attract many younger women and narrowed its focus to the single issue of Prohibition, abandoning many of its most forward-looking stands.

The story of the early W.C.T.U. is the story of churchwomen, a large proportion of them Methodists. Its membership was predominantly white, middle-class and Protestant, though with some exceptions as Bordin points out. The Ohio Crusade and the W.C.T.U. built on existing churchwomen's networks formed through missionary societies and other
denominational women's groups. Several of the most prominent leaders, including Willard herself, were Methodist Episcopal laywomen who derived their inspiration and determination from the conviction that God called them into the work of the Union. Methodists, indeed all church people, need to rediscover the earliest history of the W.C.T.U. and claim it as part of their heritage. Bordin begins the reclamation project in this volume as she recreates the lively activity of these foremothers. This good beginning should be expanded upon through regional studies as well as a closer look at the religious motivations of W.C.T.U. women, and especially at precisely how women's energy was channeled out of traditional male-dominated church institutions into an alternative woman-run organization. Because Bordin has shown the importance of the W.C.T.U. she has provided impetus for further research. Surely this is one of the most valuable services a scholar can give.

Carolyn De Swarte Gifford
Evanston, Illinois