



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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New Light on Frances Willard

In this issue Dr. Carolyn De Swarte Gifford tells the fascinating story of a **Discovery** that is providing a new and profound understanding of Frances E. Willard, one of the greatest Methodist leaders of the nineteenth century. Dr. Gifford is a noted Methodist scholar who earned her Ph.D. degree in the field of History and Literature of Religions at Northwestern University. From 1983 to 1986 she was Coordinator, Women's and Ethnic History Project, General Commission on Archives and History, The United Methodist Church. From 1987 to 1988 she served as Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Literature of Religions at Northwestern University, and the following year she was Research Associate and Visiting Assistant Professor in Women's Studies in Religion at Harvard Divinity School.

The Journals of Frances E. Willard

Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, Editor

A decade ago, in 1982, the librarian at the Frances E. Willard Memorial Library, National Woman's Christian Temperance Union headquarters in Evanston, Illinois, opened the door of an obscure cupboard and discovered Frances Willard's 49-volume diary (or as Willard called it, her journal). That simple act, done in response to a researcher's query: "What do you think is in that cupboard up there?" presaged a metaphoric door opening into the mind and heart of one of the most influential reformers of the nineteenth century and into the world which she inhabited.

The discovery of such an exciting cache of papers was totally unexpected since the journals had been missing for a half century. Willard's biographer, Mary Earhart (*Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics*, 1944), implied in the introduction to her book that Willard's faithful personal secretary Anna Gordon had destroyed a large number of Willard's

personal papers. Historians had assumed that the journal was among them and were resigned to the idea that scholars would have access only to the brief portions of the journal which appear in Willard's autobiography *Glimpses of Fifty Years* (1889) and in Rachel Strachey's 1912 biography. Happily the journal was not irretrievably lost but merely misplaced. It now appears doubtful that Gordon destroyed any of Willard's papers. The current WCTU librarian often unearths more Willard correspondence and published writings simply by continuing to burrow among boxes and folders that nobody has bothered to open for decades.

Willard was probably the most renowned nineteenth-century American Methodist. For nineteen years, from 1879 until her death in 1898, she was president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and an international, political, religious, and reform leader. Through Willard's speaking and writing, through her modeling of an ideal of American womanhood which blended the earlier image of the True Woman—pious, pure, and domestic—with her vision of the New Woman—independent, at home in the public domain, and concerned for reform in every aspect of American life, she touched the hearts of a large segment of middle-class, mainstream America and reshaped its understanding of women's social roles and its notions of gender relationships.

The contents of the journal comprise over eight thousand pages, closely written and sometimes nearly illegible. They document the fifteenth to thirty-first years of Willard's life (1855–1870) and her life from her early to her mid-fifties (1893 and 1896), when she was in her second decade as president of the WCTU, at that time the largest women's organization in the world.

The journal of her adolescence and young womanhood provides us with an informative and complex self-portrait. It traces Willard's efforts to develop character—that typical Victorian blend of intellectual, moral, and spiritual virtues,—and it records her evaluations of progress toward her goal. It functions as a crucial vehicle of self-revelation and self-examination as she worked through her ethical dilemmas. Of particular interest to Methodist historians is the locus of her character development: an earnest, supportive community of moral, intellectual, and spiritual persons who were centered around the new Methodist town of Evanston, Illinois, with its three Methodist institutions of higher education—Garrett Biblical Institute, Northwestern University, and the North Western Female College (NWFC).

Willard's early journals intimately document her experience as a member of this community. Within its sheltering atmosphere she grew to maturity. She completed her formal education at NWFC, was baptized and joined the Methodist Episcopal church, participating regularly in Sunday worship, mid-week Class meeting, and Sunday School. She became engaged to a young, promising Methodist minister (Charles Fowler, later to become a Methodist bishop) but decided, after much soul searching,

to end her engagement. As her first vocation she chose school teaching, and, with the aid of members of her community, she secured a succession of teaching positions in both public schools and Methodist institutions. In her mid-twenties she grew more and more committed to what she termed "the cause of woman," investigating woman's position in Europe and the Middle East through a two-and-one-half-year study tour in these regions. In addition, mid-nineteenth century, northern, middle-class American Methodism comes to life on the pages of Willard's journal. A compelling picture of its ethos, customs, mores, and rituals can be drawn from this extensive record of a young woman's life.

Willard's later journals give great insight into her stature as a key leader in an international reform community, shuttling between the United States and England. They show a woman in late middle age whose years of relentless labor—traveling, speaking, writing, meeting, strategizing—had caught up with her, leaving her worn out and ill, with a body unable to keep pace with her still intensively active mind and spirit. During the mid-1890s Willard mourned the loss of her mother, for much of her life the source of Willard's greatest emotional support and spiritual sustenance. Her journal became a place for grieving, as it did in the 1860s after the deaths of her sister and father. The journal also touchingly documents the existence of a tightly woven community of women reformers that functioned as an alternative family for Willard, who remained single throughout her life.

Whenever such exciting, insightful, and useful material comes to light, its discovery urgently calls for a reinterpretation of past scholarship on a historical figure or an era. This is certainly true in the case of the Willard journals. They make it possible for us to recreate her experience—especially her faith and her intellectual quest—and to understand more deeply just what motivated this dynamic reform leader who insisted throughout her public life to her Methodist community and, indeed, to all Americans: "Woman will bless and brighten every place she enters, and she will enter every place!"

In describing her work, Dr. Gifford writes, "Since fall of 1986 I have been transcribing and editing Willard's journal in order to publish a one-volume selected edition with introduction and annotations. The edition is scheduled by the University of Illinois Press for 1994 publication. Both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission are generously supporting this documentary editing project, and the Women's Studies in Religion Program of the Harvard Divinity School made it possible for me to plan the edition with a research fellowship during 1988–89.

“The journals are already on microfilm as an addendum to the *Temperance and Prohibition Papers* (edited by Jimerson, Blouin, and Isetts, 1977). The journal microfilm is available from the Bentley Library, University of Michigan, but it has no finding aids and is, thus, nearly impenetrable. I have recently placed a complete transcription of the 49-volume journal in the Willard Memorial Library for scholarly use. I am presently preparing summaries of the contents of the volumes as an accompaniment to the transcription since it is my wish to make the journal readily available to researchers.”