
Emerging out of a 2006 University of Oxford conference of the same name, the volume’s editors organized a theoretical and historical work at the crossroads of women’s history, American religious history and the history of American foreign relations. The book contains case studies of women missionary histories presented in three themed sections: women, mission and nation, bookended by reflective and interventionist theoretical essays about the underpinnings of the field. In the introduction the editors argue that “the essays… expand the field of U.S. women’s history into international arenas, reveal the global spread of American culture, and broaden the scope of analysis of the history of the American Empire.” Furthermore, by looking carefully at women, mission and nation, the editors respond to earlier works by suggesting that women missionaries negotiated their fields with layered loyalties or “competing kingdoms,” making the women neither “pawns nor apologists for the state” (1-2).

In the first section Jane Hunter and Ian Tyrell revisit their foundational works of the 1980’s and 90’s to integrate new historical scholarship on transnationalism and cultural imperialism. Hunter and Tyrell, authors of The Gospel of Gentility and Woman’s World/Woman’s Empire respectively, contextualize their past works as part of the emergence of new American history at the end of the 20th century while arguing for the reinstatement of foreign relations and global history into women’s American history. Hunter and Tyrell both suggest various ways of integrating multiple methodological research into the subfield and reapproaching women’s history altogether as a history of complicated historical actors capable of supporting and undermining imperial projects simultaneously. The second through fourth sections focus on historical case studies that demonstrate the complicated role of women missionaries in regional and world histories. Using biography, institutional histories and regional histories, all within individual chapters, contributors’ studies work together to flesh out the variable and often
contradictory nature of women’s missionary culture primarily in the 19th century with a few forays into the 20th century.

Evidence used throughout the volume intervenes on the bedrock works in the field by introducing new ways of expanding the analysis of women in the mission field. As only one example, in “Canonizing Harriet Newell: Women, the Evangelical Press, and the Foreign Mission movement in New England, 1800-1840”, Mary Kupiec Cayton studies the creation of the famous story of the death of the intended missionary Harriet Newell and the rise of middle-class women as public agents and missionaries and mission supporters. Using evidence from popular women’s presses, early 19th century demographics and sermons, Cayton weaves together a cultural history of women’s missionary history that “riffs” on biography but really describes the creation of a highly effective and socially mobilizing historical memory.

Lastly, Mary Renda provides a thoughtful conclusion offering where we are headed and invitations to join in with an essay entitled “Doing Everything.” Looking back on the essays in the volume and pointing out how American women missionaries both strengthened and undermined imperialism and racism, Renda asks, “How shall we understand such seeming contradictions in the history of U.S. protestant women’s work?” (369) Offering a brief exploration of race and missionary projects, Renda concludes by piecing out the realms of missionary women’s intimate, private lives and thoughts with the political and public to reveal the reasons for such often contradictory and “competing kingdoms” at work in women’s lives.

The book is an invitation for scholars from multiple subfields to join and for the paradigm of “competing kingdoms” to continue to develop. By its very structure, the volume invites scholars of Catholic American missionaries to the table to ask how Catholics may or may not enter into the larger re-theorizations provided for the Protestant American missionary history. In order to understand the complexity of the missionary field for American citizens, it must be understood how other Christians and smaller range protestant evangelicals, such as Mormons, interacted in the field and at home in the
States. This volume will be a source of questions and useful examples for scholars interested in American religion, U.S. women’s history, foreign relations and world history.

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