

Devil of the Domestic Sphere: Temperance, Gender, and Middle-Class Ideology, 1800-1860

Jon Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Miller, Jon (2008) "Devil of the Domestic Sphere: Temperance, Gender, and Middle-Class Ideology, 1800-1860," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss3/10>

Review

Miller, Jon

Summer 2008

Martin, Scott C. *Devil of the Domestic Sphere: Temperance, Gender, and Middle-class Ideology, 1800-1860*. Northern Illinois University Press, \$38.00 hardcover ISBN 9780875803852

Antebellum Temperance Reform and Gender

Devil of the Domestic Sphere, like most cultural studies of the period, describes antebellum American history as characterized by many dramatic changes in American life. Printed matter, full of earnest exhortation, became ubiquitous. Transportation networks improved remarkably. People moved around more than ever, and as they traveled, they moved goods with unprecedented ease, completely remaking the American economy. A dominant middle class, with a powerful and enduring middle-class ideology, emerged. And, as historians of the period know well, Americans, especially white American men, responded to all this dizzying upheaval with alcoholic excess. They drank to celebrate new lives, and they drank to mourn old lives. They drank to get through another day, and they drank because they had a habit of drinking. America was a nation of drunkards.

Temperance, with its focus on sobriety as the best strategy for surviving this new world of overwhelming distraction, provided a tremendously useful set of terms and arguments for Americans concerned about the immediate and long-term future of their communities. Amid so much cultural intoxication, American temperance advocates proposed new distributions of those personal responsibilities needed to maintain the coherence and efficiency of communities. They were successful; their proposals were often approved and accepted; and today the cultural historian, as Scott C. Martin demonstrates, can find in antebellum temperance the beginnings of much of what we recognize as American middle-class ideology.

Devil of the Domestic Sphere focuses on the extent to which antebellum temperance advocates manifested a prejudice against women as they proposed

new definitions of mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, friends, neighbors, masters, slaves, strangers, and significant others. Women were not afforded an equal claim to social status and legal rights. And women were not rewarded so well for accepting responsibility for the new duties proposed by the temperance literature. In other words, the antebellum temperance movement was not, primarily or even secondarily, a feminist movement. *Devil of the Domestic Sphere* names this prejudice with honesty: the book pays careful attention to the misogyny that antebellum temperance literature consistently shows. As, for example, the second and fourth chapters argue in detail, the women of temperance literature are typically cast as victims and as moral exemplars; by a cruel logic, they are victimized by passionate men because they fail to sober these men through the exertion of moral influence. Longsuffering and moral perfection emerge as twin duties for women.

After the Civil War, not surprisingly, American feminists did not have fond memories of antebellum temperance reform. Yet, as Martin argues persuasively, cultural and feminist historians cannot overlook antebellum temperance reform as an arena in which American women first accomplished early and fundamental feminist reforms. Working within a misogynist community of reformers, women made advances toward the social and legal equalities they sought. As the introduction explains, modern-day feminist scholars are comfortable locating the origins of post-war feminist reform in women's work within the antebellum antislavery movement. Martin argues that that the experience women gained within the antebellum temperance movement, which was so full of misogyny, was also important.

The varieties of antebellum temperance reform are near endless. From place to place and from time to time, regional, political, and personal concerns led to the twisting of temperance arguments towards widely differing goals. It is possible, however, to take a large view of antebellum temperance reform and identify certain basic characteristics inherent to most of the writings of the period. Martin recognizes this complexity, and it supports its arguments about the general shape of antebellum temperance culture through the meticulous collection of a very large quantity of specific, thoroughly documented details. The book is very well grounded in a far-ranging study of primary materials. Martin focuses on some of the larger clusters of available materials, so the collected evidence, not surprisingly, most concerns temperance and women among Protestant communities in the Northeast. But the country was thoroughly saturated with temperance reform. And so were Canada and England.

Temperance was not just a national but also an international reform. All of this temperance reforming was profoundly interconnected, as distant reformers exchanged pamphlets and periodicals, freely borrowing the expedient. *Devil of the Domestic Sphere* could have many more chapters; it does not exhaust its subject. Scholarly interest in antebellum temperance literature has steadily increased over the last ten to twenty years, and this volume will do nothing but encourage further exploration of this important subject.

Jon Miller is Associate Professor of English at The University of Akron. A former editor of The Social History of Alcohol Review and The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs, his edition of T.S. Arthur's temperance novel, Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, is available from Copley Publishing.