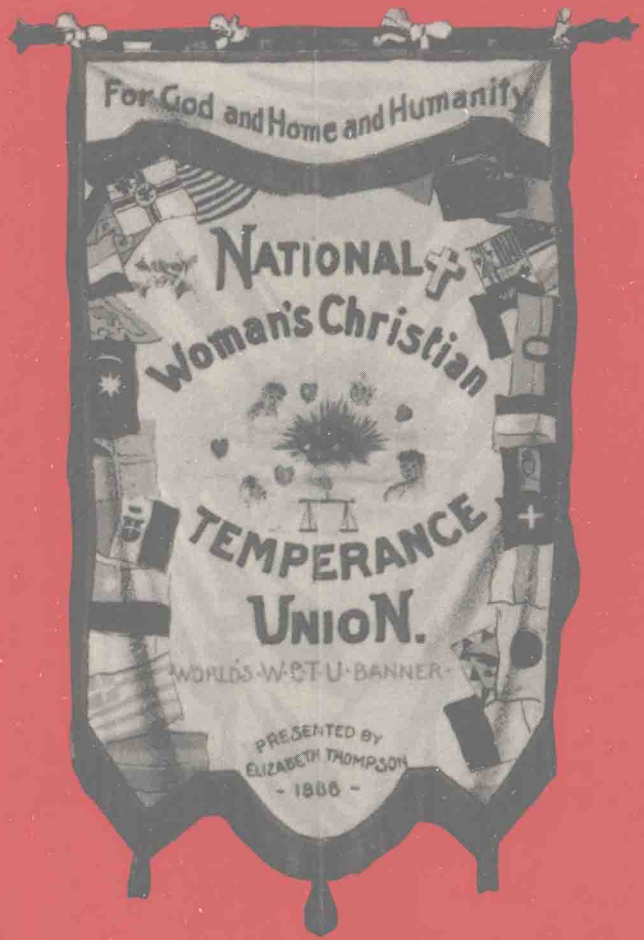
WOMAN AND TEMPERANCE

The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900



Ruth Bordin

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Woman and Temperance

for

Anna, David, Jason,

and Martin

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

Nearly a decade has passed since *Woman and Temperance* was first published. During that time the literature on the women's movement has expanded exponentially, and temperance historians, as well as other social scientists, have continued to produce careful studies of every phase of the alcohol reform question. In fact they have formally organized as the Alcohol and Temperance History Group, which publishes a small journal, *The Social History of Alcohol Review*.

Where did *Woman and Temperance* fit in this burgeoning of scholarship in the 1980s and what does it continue to contribute to the field? When it was published it was the first full-length scholarly study of women and the temperance movement, and in that sense it pioneered in both women's and temperance history. And it remains the only full-length study of the nineteenth-century Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Also, I noted the extent and means of women's political influence in this movement before suffrage. Other studies have begun to fill out the picture but have not yet replaced this book. There are many facets of women and temperance, however, that need much more exhaustive study. Many questions are still unanswered, some of which I shall mention later on. But first let us look at how the issues raised by *Woman and Temperance* have been treated during the last decade by historians of temperance and of women.

Despite the fact that Joseph Gusfield's 1955 study concentrated on women and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union,[1] the large body of new and significant work by historians of temperance in the 1960s and 1970s had concerned itself little with the part women played in the movement. During the last decade, however, temperance historians have paid much more attention to women. The women's temperance crusade of 1873–74 has received

definitive and exhaustive treatment from Jack Blocker.[2] Jed Dannenbaum has consistently included the part played by women in several articles and his study of the temperance movement in Cincinnati.[3] Among his other contributions Dannenbaum has given us our first careful look at the pre–Civil War women's temperance movement, found close parallels to the Crusade, and incidentally pointed out one of the weaknesses of my work. I did not understand when I wrote *Woman and Temperance* the extent of the continuity between the antebellum and the late nineteenth-century women's temperance cause. Nonetheless, that continuity can be overemphasized. The Crusade had precedents, to be sure, but it was in the 1870s that women for the first time seriously and with sophistication attempted to use political devices to effect their goals.

Temperance scholars have also explored in other directions. David Fahey has placed temperance in its proper international setting by editing the journals of Jessie Forsyth, a temperance organizer for the Good Templars who worked not only in the United States but also in Great Britain and Australia.[4] Jack Blocker has contributed through his article "Separate Paths" to the integration of women's temperance activity into the mainstream of women's history,[5] as has Steven Buechler in his study of the nineteenth-century suffrage movement in Illinois.[6]

Temperance historians have discovered the women, but it has been harder for the historians of women to discover temperance. Essentially *Woman and Temperance* is about a women's political movement. Its major message, and I would hope its major impact on scholarship, was to point out that in the nineteenth century, long before women had the vote, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union effectively used political influence and developed a range of sophisticated political weapons—testifying before Congressional committees, lobbying the members of legislative bodies, writing legislation, or hiring a paid professional lobbyist in Washington—to achieve political, primarily legislative, aims.

The results achieved by the WCTU were impressive: dozens of local option and Sunday closing laws, almost universal "scientific" temperance education, much stricter age-of-consent legislation to protect children from sexual abuse, specialized rehabiliatory institutions for handicapped and delinquent women and children in the various states, city ordinances authorizing police matrons to deal with women offenders. Much of this legislation lasted until the adoption of national prohibition by federal amendment in 1918. Scientific temperance education, however, stayed on the statute books

in most of the nation until the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933. Some of the state institutions for delinquent and handicapped for which the WCTU wrote the first legislation are still in existence, although in much modified form.

To achieve this record the WCTU used all the techniques perfected by the modern Political Action Committee, and like present-day pressure groups produced its results with lobbying techniques that were quite independent of delivering the vote. The one thing it lacked that the late twentieth-century PAC possesses was money. But I do not doubt that if the WCTU had had access to substantial campaign contributions it would have used those as well. It is true that many of these techniques, especially the petition, had been pioneered by antislavery groups, under male leadership but with many female signatures. Antebellum temperance organizations had also written legislation and lobbied legislative bodies to achieve their ends. Suffrage organizations used these techniques concomittantly with temperance women. But none used these political strategies as comprehensively as the WCTU. In the nineteenth century most women who exercised political influence, and many did, exerted their power under its banner.

This was the message I attempted to convey in *Woman and Temperance*. However, the important political role played by the nineteenth-century WCTU continues to be underplayed or overlooked by feminist historians. They do not so much deny the importance of the temperance movement for women's causes as ignore it. One reason for this neglect is that despite the fact that Eleanor Flexner and Anne and Andrew Scott early recognized the importance of the WCTU's mass appeal and mass base to the suffrage cause,[7] today's scholars seem unable to free themselves from a focus on suffrage organizations per se. Also feminist historians continue to feel uncomfortable placing what they see as the anti-libertarian temperance reform in the mainstream of their cause.

This reluctance of feminist historians echoes the prejudices and fears of the nineteenth-century suffrage movement to whom historians of the women's movement direct the bulk of their attention. The constituencies of both movements were very similar. Although suffrage women were almost all temperance women, and by the late nineteenth century most, but not all, temperance women were supporters of suffrage, neither was comfortable with her bed partners. In the early 1880s the WCTU was skittish about associating with the "radical" suffrage movement. The National Woman Suffrage Association was equally apprehensive of open support by the

WCTU in the 1890s, fearful that too many male voters would associate an increased threat of prohibition with the vote for women.

But both recognized their need of each other. Anna Howard Shaw wrote to Lucy Anthony, Susan's niece, "I am now in the Temperance Union save in the interests of suffrage. . . . I can reach hundreds of women I could not reach through the suffrage association alone."[8] Mary Livermore echoed Shaw's sentiments a decade later: "The work I have undertaken for temperance and for woman suffrage, although the two organizations are entirely distinct, has nevertheless intermingled. It is difficult to advocate one, without encroaching on the boundary of the other."[9]

When I wrote *Woman and Temperance* I was aware of, but did not fully appreciate, the extent of the suffrage movement's discomfit with the women's temperance cause. Although suffrage organizations needed WCTU womanpower and support and used it, they hoped the temperance presence would not be obvious to the men who cast the votes. But the friendship between Willard and Anthony and among other leaders helped keep the peace and also permitted me to misunderstand the depths of their uneasiness. Eventually, of course, the two causes went their separate ways, and as single-issue movements, both prohibition and the vote for women suffered. The suffragists expected too much of a simple instrumental solution, that the means (the vote for women) would result in their desired end, broad societal change. And when in the twentieth century the WCTU chose to see prohibition as their single goal, they lost their vision of a meaningful new society. But in the nineteenth century Frances Willard and the WCTU espoused broader aims. The Do Everything policy of the WCTU mandated an attack on social, economic, and political "evil" from all directions and at all levels. In the twentieth century prohibition became the single goal, and the distaste of the 1970s women's movement for anti-libertarian causes made it easier for the new feminist historians to identify only with the suffrage movement.

One exception to the neglect of the role of temperance by feminist historians was Barbara Epstein's *The Politics of Domesticity*.[10] Epstein correctly saw the women's crusade and the WCTU as part of a long-term process by which middle-class women began to take control of their own lives and to feel their collective power. Epstein's research was sometimes superficial, and temperance was a much more widely based movement than Epstein realized, including immigrant and black women. Also alcohol abuse was a real, growing social problem, not a symbolic excuse for gender conflict. But Epstein and I, working independently of each other, both documented the

importance of temperance in moving women toward active political lives. I am much more skeptical than she that the crusade of 1873 and 1874 and the phenomenal growth of the WCTU can best be explained as the result of women's increasing perception of sexual antagonism, but our two books, both published in early 1981, agree on the central role of temperance in the nineteenth-century women's movement.

Mari Jo Buhle, although her primary focus is on labor and socialism, also pays temperance its due.[11] Her monumental volume *Women and American Socialism* was completed too early to benefit from recent work on the women's temperance movement, but she understood from the beginning the significance and impact of temperance on women, and she has written recently that to miss their importance "is to pass over a remarkable chapter in women's political history. Too often the struggle for enfranchisement has circumscribed our understanding of ninteenth-century women's activism."[12] Nonetheless feminist historians overall still find it difficult to accord proper due to the cause that the main body of activist women in the last decades of the nineteenth century saw as *the* issue and used as the instrument to send them into politics and the public world.

Feminist political scientists have been quicker than historians to recognize the importance of the temperance movement in politicizing American women. For example, Suzanne Marilley has investigated the crucial and dominant role of the WCTU in the Colorado woman suffrage campaigns.[13] Political scientists generally have credited temperance women for much of the success of early suffrage referenda.[14] But they have been primarily concerned with suffrage campaigns and have not paid much mind to the broad range of social legislation successfully sponsored by the WCTU.

I would hope that during the next ten years feminist historians will turn more of their attention to women's role in the temperance cause and the temperance movement's contribution to the politicization of women. In the last analysis political action takes place on the local level, and we need studies of what happened in states and cities in the late nineteenth century that prepared for the great mass push for the vote in the second decade of the twentieth century. How much change in the demographics of WCTU membership took place? How did changes in national leadership influence changes in the priorities and agenda of the Union? One comprehensive local study has been done, and several others are underway.

The WCTU was undoubtedly the most broadly based organization of nineteenth-century women. Much more work is needed to flesh out the ethnic,

native American, and African-American groups within the temperance movement. By the 1880s enough black unions existed in the South to make separate state organizations practical (as well as segregated). For example, in 1889, South Hampton County, Virginia, not only had a black WCTU chapter, but that local had sponsored children's auxilliaries in twelve schools and two groups to help the mothers of young children.[15] Northern towns and cities also had black locals. Ann Arbor, Michigan, had a separate "colored society" as early as 1878, before the WCTU's Department of Colored Work was organized.[16] What does this activity among African-Americans mean? Is it *noblesse oblige* on the part of would-be white benefactors? Does it represent a move on the part of the daughters of enslaved women to take charge of their lives and enter the body politic? Does it indicate that black men were finding their new role so humiliating that they found the nineteenth-century's drug of choice, alcohol, a way out? And their wives took refuge in the small comfort that a WASP WCTU, with its lofty ideas about changing the whole society, could give them?

Ethnic unions also deserve attention. Did Irish servant girls organize their own unions or were they occasionally brought along to meetings by their employers? Their names and addresses appear in the local records of the Ann Arbor WCTU. Scandinavians and Germans had organizers and locals of their own. Did temperance activity help them to gain acceptance in the larger American society? Was it a small effort or a large one in the minds of immigrant women? Temperance was a growing and vigorous cause in their homelands. Did any interaction take place on the membership level with the temperance movement in Scandinavia or only among the national leadership?

It will not be easy to move beyond the scanty records at the national level to investigate these aspects of the women's temperance movement. The records of African-American churches and the files of black newspapers will help as will the foreign-language press of immigrant groups. Hard and tedious work, but the rewards may be great. The 1980s have provided fertile seedbed in which both the history of women and the history of the temperance movement have flourished and borne fruit. But there is still much to be done.

1. Joseph Gusfield, "Social Structure and Moral Reform: A Study of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union," *American Journal of Sociology* 61 (November 1955): 221–32.

2. Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *Give to the Winds Thy Fears: Woman's Crusade, 1873–1874* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985).
3. Jed Dannenbaum, *Drink and Disorder: Temperance Reform in Cincinnati from the Washingtonian Revival to the WCTU* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).
4. David M. Fahey, *The Collected Writings of Jessie Forsyth, 1847–1937: The Good Templars and Temperance Reform on Three Continents* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1988).
5. Jack S. Blocker, Jr., "Separate Paths: Suffragists and the Woman's Temperance Crusade," *Signs* 10:3 (Spring 1985): 460–76.
6. Stephen M. Buechler, *The Transformation of the Woman Suffrage Movement: The Case of Illinois, 1850–1920* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986).
7. Eleanor Flexner, *A Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Anne Firor Scott and Andrew McKay Scott, *One Half the People: The Fight for Woman Suffrage* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1975).
8. Shaw to Anthony, 11 February 1889. Copy of letter in Box 18, folder 420 in the Dillon Collection, Schlesinger Library of Women's History, Radcliffe College.
9. Mary Livermore, *The Story of My Life* (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington and Co., 1899), 583.
10. Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981).
11. Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).
12. Book review in *Labour/Le Travail: Journal of Canadian Labour History* 22 (Fall 1988): 230–33.
13. Suzanne M. Marilley, "Why the Vote? Woman Suffrage and the Politics of Democratic Development in the United States, 1820–1893" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1985); and "Role of Temperance and Organizational Resources in the Colorado Woman Suffrage Victory of 1893," in *American Political Science Association Meetings Proceedings*, 1986.
14. For example, see Eileen L. McDonagh and H. Douglas Price, "Woman Suffrage in the Progressive Era," *American Political Science Review* 79 (1985): 415–35.
15. Eliza Comstock to Frances Willard, 7 March 1889. Roll 16, WCTU Series, Temperance and Prohibition Papers Microfilm Edition.
16. Minutes, 2 April 1878, Ann Arbor, Michigan, WCTU. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Introduction

This book was born as I investigated the genesis of a girls' reformatory for young offenders established by the state of Michigan in 1880. The Michigan Woman's Christian Temperance Union, an organization only four years old at the time, was clearly the sole instigator and major implementer of this project. At its convention held in Grand Rapids in 1878, the state WCTU had been moved to action by a speech of Mary Lathrap, one of the WCTU's founders and a licensed preacher in the Methodist church. Lathrap energized the convention with a speech on the "fallen woman." Asking the Union members to be concerned with their sisters, not only inebriate men, Lathrap concluded her address with a call for the WCTU to work for legislation to establish a state-supported house of shelter for delinquent girls, primarily prostitutes, "especially the youngest—who have some of life's sweetness left."[1] The Michigan Union appointed a committee, launched a statewide petition drive, and collected over twenty thousand signatures. Tens of thousands of copies of Lathrap's address were distributed around the state. As Michigan's superintendent of public instruction described the enthusiasm these petitions mobilized, "There was never, probably, a memorial placed before the general public for signatures, received with such warm approval as this."[2]

Several bills proposing a girls' reformatory were presented to the next legislature, including one drawn by the WCTU. The Union's bill was eventually passed in 1879. Perhaps its most important provision stipulated that women be appointed to a majority of the places on the institution's Board of Control. These were the first women to hold public office in the state of Michigan. Two were members of the WCTU. The Union also successfully sponsored a provision in the law that stipulated that no men,

only women, could staff the new correctional institution. When the reformatory opened, the superintendent, the physician, the teachers, and the housekeepers were all women. There was only one exception: a man ran the heating plant. This exercise in local history suggested that in 1878 the Michigan WCTU was already a major force in Michigan politics, a dynamic, strong, woman's organization with program concerns ranging far beyond narrow temperance goals. But further investigation revealed that little has been written about the WCTU's activities and structure, especially by women. Why not?

At about the same time the microfilm edition of the Temperance and Prohibition Papers was being prepared. The Michigan Historical Collections of the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan was a major participant in this federally funded project.[3] The raw materials from which a study of the WCTU as a major women's organization could be made were close at hand. The WCTU's records, its publications, and the scrapbooks of Frances Willard's family and her secretaries, as well as her own correspondence, were being made easily available to scholars.

The history of temperance was also taking on new life. In the single year 1979, the temperance movement was given able and provocative treatment by Jack Blocker, Larry Engelmans, and William Rorabaugh.[4] Why did our ancestors view temperance as a major social reform? Was temperance a popular reform movement of the nineteenth century for the simple reason that Americans drank too much? Or was devotion to temperance a symbolic medium for larger issues of social control or threatened status? The historians of the 1970s tended to find the answer in alcohol abuse. They observed that in the United States just after independence, a surplus of cheap grain plus technological developments in distilling vastly increased the supply of spirits. Overindulgence peaked in the early nineteenth century. The United States became a drunken society, and alcoholism a major problem. Temperance reformers slowed the pace of alcohol abuse in the 1840s and 1850s, but after the Civil War, saloons multiplied and the problem was again on the rise.

That historians asked these questions represented an abrupt turnaround in how they viewed the temperance movement. For twenty years after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, historians ignored the depth and scope of the problem Prohibition attempted to solve. A whole generation of writers viewed temperance agitation as a frivolous interference with basic individual liberty and a preoccupation with an issue that was at best

marginal to the real problems of a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society.[5] Historians saw the saloon as a benign institution that served a vital social function as a poor man's club.

But in the 1970s alcohol again came to be seen as a drug problem of national proportions. This new approach for historians found its best summary in Norman Clark's *Deliver Us from Evil*.[6] Clark rescued Prohibition and the temperance movement from its previous association with bigoted cranks and placed it squarely in the American reformist tradition as part of a larger solution to the social problems accompanying urbanization and industrialization. He recognized the temperance movement as a rational response to a genuine social evil. A decade earlier, in his major study, *Symbolic Crusade*, sociologist Joseph Gusfield analyzed the temperance movement somewhat differently.[7] Gusfield believed temperance reform was essentially divorced from economic interests. He dubbed it "a symbolic crusade," not an instrumental reform oriented toward producing the specific goal of a temperate America. To Gusfield, neither the temperance movement nor the state and national prohibition legislation that resulted was a specific attack on alcohol abuse, but rather they represented a form of social control. Prohibition was an attempt by middle-class Protestants, who were unable to preserve the status quo, with their previous social and economic dominance threatened by the Catholic immigrant, urbanization, and industrialization, to impose at least one tenet of their personal morality—sobriety—on the larger society. Gusfield erred in not recognizing how real the problem of alcohol abuse was. Also, he did not fully understand that the temperance movement transcended class and status. While its leadership was middle and upper middle-class in the nineteenth century, the temperance cause attracted adherents from all levels of society. It also transcended Protestantism. Catholics too subscribed to temperance goals. Nonetheless Gusfield made one major contribution that may not have been equaled. He put temperance in the reformist tradition, treated it as a serious impulse of reformers, and intelligently scrutinized its leadership.

Joseph Timberlake and John C. Burnam, also writing in the 1960s, were fully aware of the prohibition movement's role as an integral part of the Progressive program.[8] Timberlake like Gusfield viewed temperance as a genuine reform, an attempt to deal effectively with many of the same problems addressed by other aspects of the Progressive program. He perceived considerable validity in the Progressive's belief that alcohol was