

Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933, by Alison M. Parker. Women in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xii, 286 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$42.50 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

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In *Purifying America*, Alison M. Parker provides a useful analysis of pro-censorship activities undertaken by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the American Library Association (ALA) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on organizational records and publications, Parker seeks to revise the standard notion that advocates of censorship were a small minority of elite or eccentric men bent on suppressing obscenity "while the rest of the country's citizens were uninterested, occasionally irritated, or amused" (4). Rather, Parker asserts, a broad spectrum of middle-class Americans mobilized by women's clubs, religious organizations, and professional associations campaigned to regulate America's public culture. Concerned about the proliferation of commercialized "low" art forms such as burlesque, moving pictures, and crime-story newspapers, as well as the emergence of "high" art forms whose creators presumed their works to be immune from moral criticism, these advocates of censorship sought to promote "moral purity" in the arts, literature, and entertainment. The WCTU campaigned for the regulation of public culture with particular vigor, believing that doing so would empower middle-class Protestant women, protect children of all classes, and ensure a virtuous future for the nation.

Assuming that laws sanctioning cultural purity would be effective only insofar as pure forms of culture became available, the WCTU assumed responsibility for creating a morality-based public culture. For example, it published a children's literary magazine, pressured museums to exhibit "uplifting" paintings and to shun artwork depicting violence or female nudity, and campaigned along with other religious and professional organizations for the production of "pure" motion pictures. Motivated by a maternalist conception of women's public power, the WCTU's pro-censorship activism fits rather neatly into the mainstream of Progressive women's activism. Probably the majority of Progressive women judged the fitness of society according to its willingness to adopt a child-centered standard of virtue.

Parker's analysis of pro-censorship activism in the WCTU offers insight into the middle-class's earnest support of censorship, the relationship between censorship and Progressivism, and women's public identity between the 1880s and the 1930s. Unlike male vice crusaders

in organizations such as the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, the WCTU's pro-censorship department chose not to focus narrowly on the enforcement of laws that called for the legal suppression of "obscene" materials. Recognizing the communicative power of culture in its many forms, the WCTU instead made "purity" its focus and granted itself the authority to judge the moral content of "high" and "low" culture, encompassing everything from circuses to the ballet, children's literature to adult newspapers, popular movies to museum art exhibits. The WCTU favored legal censorship at the local, state, and federal levels, not merely to remove from circulation the worst artifacts of culture (that is, the "obscene") but to demand purity in all of the cultural media consumed by Americans.

Parker's single chapter on the ALA is somewhat overshadowed by her six chapters on the WCTU, but the ALA nonetheless emerges as an interesting organization. The ALA subscribed to much of the maternalism that motivated the WCTU, but its members, mostly women librarians, supported the professional rather than the legal censorship of literature. They argued that the public must trust "expert" librarians to distinguish between good literature and bad. Yet, in reality, librarians were often forced to share power with committees made up of lay people (sometimes WCTU women) who wanted a hand in selecting their libraries' books. Moreover, because local communities tended to see librarians as mere caretakers of books rather than as true experts, most libraries abandoned efforts to censor adult reading by the early twentieth century. Even children's librarians, because they were often young and female, retained only limited power to decide which children's literature to purchase or to guide youthful patrons in choosing what to read.

Purifying America will be of particular interest to historians of women and to readers in areas such as the Midwest where the WCTU enjoyed a stronghold for many years. Yet the book is not without flaws. It suffers from redundancy and reads like a doctoral dissertation. More important, Parker's history of pro-censorship activism lacks context and nuanced analysis. Readers learn too little about the lives of the people in the ALA and the WCTU or about how these women (and men) interacted with their families and communities. Ultimately, Parker shies away from telling us how or why pro-censorship activists' quest for cultural authority really mattered.

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