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Abolishing Liquor, Advancing Society: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in the
United States

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In the years leading up to the passing of the 18th Amendment, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union was amongst the most public groups advocating to eliminate liquor consumption in the United States. Comprised mostly of white, well-educated, middle-class Protestant women, the WCTU focused on the negative effects of alcohol on ethnic, racial, and socio-economic groups other than their own. Using the robust historiography on the WCTU as well as selections from Frances E. Willard's journal and news accounts from the time, this paper aims to uncover the complicated and even contradictory motives the organization had in the quest for temperance and investigates how it grew to espouse larger political goals. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union commenced its work with a focus on the prohibition of alcohol, which in its estimation would change the drinking behaviors of working-class men and by extension protect women and children. Over time, the organization's focus shifted to creating more immediate social change in the lives of women and children. With this transformation, the nature of their political framework changed as did their projects. Willard and other members kept temperance as a primary concern, but ultimately reconceptualized it as a contributing factor to address rather than the only cause for concern.

Women joined the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in such large numbers that the organization became the largest women's movement of the nineteenth century and the first women's mass movement.¹ The group had nearly 150,000 dues-paying members by 1892.

¹ Many in society viewed temperance as "a maternal struggle." Maternalism characterized the ideological core of women's reform concerns and was based on the grounds that society needed to protect women's maternal capacity.

Including auxiliaries, such as the Young Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the WCTU had well over 200,000 members and continued to grow.² The size and influence of the Union allowed women near complete control of the temperance movement from its founding in 1874 until the rapid growth of the Anti-Saloon League, a national organization which focused heavily on the benefits of prohibition by influencing politicians.³ Although no longer the largest temperance movement in the nation, the Union continued to push temperance education in schools and led campaigns for prohibition laws in several states during the late nineteenth century.⁴

Both men and women readily understood the eradication of alcohol as a woman's issue, because alcohol abuse threatened the home; which was believed by many to be a woman's domain. In the home, theoretically, a man's heavy drinking could have a negative impact on a woman. Women could be the victims of physical abuse, loss of family wages to alcohol, and a husband's infidelity.⁵ Yet unlike much of the work women did in the nineteenth century, temperance organized large numbers of women around an overtly political goal in an era when they could not vote. WCTU president Frances Willard instructed leaders to encourage women to let their voices be heard as often as possible, further attracting women to the organization.⁶

In addition, the socio-economic conditions of a post-Industrial Revolution society facilitated the growth of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. A class of women now had

Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 468.

² Ruth Bordin, *Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1901* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 3.

³ Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 20; Carol Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-century Temperance Rhetoric*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), xv.

⁴ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 4.

⁵ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 4-5.

⁶ Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women*, 12.

the leisure time to submerge themselves in new political causes and realities.⁷ The immersion of wealthy, white, educated women into the social problems facing a society comprised of individuals of varying ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds permitted the formation of such temperance groups. Members worked tirelessly to improve conditions for the women and children they deemed in need of assistance without totally dismantling the institutions that created them. Simultaneously, the association recognized and appealed to its members' religiosity, domestic lives, and patriotism, but insisted on changing the role of women in these arenas.⁸

For example, Frances Willard and others recognized the difficulties women faced within educational systems designed by and for men. As Willard argued: "To give ladies an 'equal chance' with gentlemen, means something more than to control a college wholly by men, arrange its surroundings solely for men, give the instruction entirely by men, and then, forsooth! [O]pen the doors *alike* to both sexes!"⁹ As the first woman president of a woman's college and first Dean of Women at Northwestern University, Willard experienced what she believed to be "demeaning treatment of her ideas and unjustified challenges to her authority."¹⁰ This caused Willard to leave institutionalized education and create a network with other leaders to teach women outside of the restraints of the recognized educational establishment. The teachings of Willard and other members became the most effective way for women to learn rhetorical skills during the nineteenth century. "I believe I am doing the girls good—teaching them decency in letter writing—etc. I have them keep everything they do in a book. I make them write on the

⁷ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 12.

⁸ Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women*, 57.

⁹ Willard, *A New Departure*, 158, as quoted in Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women*, 58.

¹⁰ Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women*, 58-60.

board—drill them on the mechanical part &c. It is sometimes quite like drudgery.”¹¹ With the educational opportunities that the WCTU provided, women had the tools and confidence to take on public personas. Because of the limited educational opportunities for women in the nineteenth century, women may have been forbidden or not felt comfortable presenting their ideas in public spaces. The education and politicization provided by the organization not only prepared women with the framework they needed to express their ideas in a professional, skillful manner, the Union also provided an audience of individuals who were willing to listen and committed to a similar cause. Willard and WCTU leadership believed that women were more comfortable learning and speaking with other women before becoming more active participants in public life, and the organization was able to create a space facilitating just that. With the educational tools provided, temperance women would become publicly active and create effective change for women, politically and socially.¹²

The WCTU in the 1870s was primarily focused on temperance and issues immediately related to it, but as the group grew in size and influence during the 1880s and 90s it began embracing a myriad of issues facing society at the time. “No problem was too complicated, no solution too innovative to find a hearing in WCTU councils of the late nineteenth century.”¹³ As temperance women began saturating themselves in many of society’s problems, temperance became less of a focal point and more of a component of complex related issues that should be dealt with simultaneously.

An early example of women using their politicization from the WCTU and temperance to call for reform of laws affecting women was divorce. The ability for individuals to divorce

¹¹ Frances E. Willard and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, *Writing out My Heart: Selections from the Journal of Frances E. Willard, 1855-96* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 242.

¹² Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women*, 72.

¹³ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 95.

varied from state to state and in most instances was only acceptable in cases of adultery.

Women's rights groups and temperance women worked to expand the right to divorce to women who were married to alcoholics. The message was clear, no woman or child should be forced to remain in relation with a drunken man.¹⁴ The group proposed, "the question on divorce is of equal importance to men and women, and ... to insure justice, women should have a place and voice in the commissions appointed by the several states to consider the divorce law."¹⁵ In 1889 the Minnesota branch fought hard against legislation passed that made the father the sole guardian of a minor child. Willard pointed out that in 1890 in thirty-six states the father was the sole "owner" of the child.¹⁶ Although no legislation was immediately passed, the WCTU exhibited their position for equal marital rights between men and women.

Prison reform was another early issue to attract widespread attention from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Cause for concern arose from gospel temperance meetings in jails; when members observed directly the experience of imprisoned women. Shortly after these meetings the WCTU petitioned for rehabilitative reformatories and police matrons, the establishment of halfway houses for released women prisoners, and demanded that women be appointed to state boards of charities and corrections. The organization emphasized that women needed equal protection and representation to men in the justice system. Their efforts were well received and there were active chapters working for prison reform in forty-five states in 1889. These reformers pressured state and local governments to meet their demands and there were instances of chapters putting up halfway houses and paying the salary of police matrons.¹⁷ The

¹⁴ Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women*, 26-27.

¹⁵ *Minutes, 1895 Convention*, 48, as quoted in Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 104.

¹⁶ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 114.

¹⁷ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 99-100.

WCTU started a conversation and began to set a standard that women needed to be protected and have equal reformatory opportunities in prisons.

Like much of their efforts, the WCTU's work with children had roots in temperance. The Union sought young members to organize and pledge to the temperance cause. Temperance women organized youth groups brought together by Sunday-schools. The focus then broadened from Sunday-school children to other youth including: bootbacks, telegraph messengers, newsboys, and street urchins. These children played a significant role in street trading and were often impoverished, abused, and frequent users of alcohol and tobacco. The association worked to provide these children with reading rooms, coffeehouses, and other safe spaces. The Union also provided food and entertainment for the children and their elders.¹⁸

Taking this work with street children further, in 1891 the WCTU created a department that served homeless children. This department focused on finding permanent and foster homes for orphans and dependent children. The department worked closely with state and local agencies to avoid the institutionalization of these children. By 1894 branches in twenty-one states were engaged in the program that focused on homeless and abused children. (Those states that did not participate had the need fulfilled by other agencies, such as the Children's Aid Societies or Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.¹⁹) Child abuse and abandonment had been a primary concern of the WCTU since its inception as it recognized both as direct results of drunkenness. By the mid-1890s, however, the Union no longer focused so closely on eradicating the alcohol consumption of parents but rather on the rescue and removal of children.

The organization's broad-reaching focus on children also included its enthusiastic promotion of the kindergarten movement. Willard found the cause extremely rewarding, calling

¹⁸ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 100-101.

¹⁹ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 102.

it “the greatest theme, next to salvation by faith, that can engage a woman’s heart and brain.”²⁰

The San Francisco Golden Gate Kindergarten Association founded the first free kindergarten in 1880. In 1890 that kindergarten alone had over fifteen hundred children enrolled. The Baltimore branch organized a free kindergarten ran by volunteers and a paid teacher and assistant. Children “from homes of wretched poverty” and four-year-olds “who used tobacco” were cleaned up, taken off the streets, and cured of their bad habits. Other children, not yet old enough for kindergarten, were cared for in a nursery. The establishment of kindergartens in urban areas were designed to allow working mothers a safe place for their children during the day. These children would spend up to twelve hours a day in the kindergartens and were fed up to three meals for as little as ten cents per day. The kindergartens also provided teacher-training programs. Many of the established kindergartens lasted well into the twentieth century and serve as a prime example of a meaningful social program precedent set by the WCTU. Yet temperance recruitment was only a minimal part of kindergarten programs and increasingly considered to be only a piece of the puzzle.²¹

The WCTU recognized problems the laboring classes encountered as issues stemming directly from alcohol. It was believed that if drunkenness were cured then the economic problems facing the working class would disappear. Willard and other members some arrogantly believed it was the responsibility of the temperance women to change the relationship between drinking and labor practices, because they conceived of it as an issue that only they understood. Their efforts began by asking new industrial giants to require total abstinence from employees. Initially, companies only acted on the WCTU’s request when basic safety was a concern and

²⁰ *Union Signal*, March 27, 1890, 8, as quoted in Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 102.

²¹ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 102-103.

even then compliance was inconsistent. This forced Willard to take a new approach. The focus then shifted to what *caused* poverty.

In her presidential address in 1886, Willard endorsed an eight-hour workday, which would reduce unemployment and in effect decrease poverty. This caught the attention and earned the backing of Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor, creating an alliance between the WCTU and organized labor. Willard proposed that the Knights of Labor support equal pay for equal work, admit women to its membership, and support woman's suffrage. Powderly and the Knights were the only labor organization to positively receive Willard's proposal and in February 1887 agreed to petition for the protection of women. Willard's relationship with Powderly and the fraternal Knights of Labor was met with opposition and fear by conservative members of the group, but Willard did not back down—emphasizing the Knights' commitment to temperance and woman's suffrage. She believed that long hours and poor conditions led men to drink and spend earned wages on alcohol. By 1889 Willard argued that to solve the issue of poverty there must be universal economic control and the whole community would have to come together.

Certainly, the WCTU expanded from their original goal of eradicating alcohol. On July 21, 1893 Willard wrote, "... Had vision in the night of a novel I might write in which woman becomes Pres't of the United States after a complete Revolution which she leads! ...".²² The political project was no longer to reform the drinking habits of men, but for women to revolutionize their place in society; at least in this one dream. During this time, Willard converted to Christian socialism and advocated for a fundamental reform of the economic system beginning with relief for the unemployed, the five-and-a-half day workweek, free technical education, free school lunches, and gradual nationalization or municipal ownership of the

²² Willard, *Writing out My Heart: Selections from the Journal of Frances E. Willard, 1855-96*, 375.

railroads, the telegraph, public utilities, and factories. Economic distress in 1893 caused other members to reject her new position.²³

Although the WCTU worked to benefit women, children, and communities, the organization became increasingly selective about whom they helped. As the temperance movement progressed the association placed blame on those they believed were responsible for the nation's alcohol problem. In the early decades of the Union, members were encouraged to work with immigrants and learn about their cultures but by 1923 affiliates supported legislation calling for the "deportation of aliens convicted of Prohibition violations." The WCTU strongly opposed Catholicism and began pushing for compulsory Bible readings in public school in hopes of increasing militant Protestant religiosity.²⁴ At this point in the 1920s leadership grew tired of resistance to their social reform efforts and began taking enforcement into their own hands. The organization paired with the Ku Klux Klan to increase liquor law enforcement and perceived the Klan as an acceptable group to join forces with, despite (and perhaps even because of) the Klan's "secretive operations and anti-immigrant white supremacist Protestant agenda."²⁵ The elitism, ethnocentrism, and anti-immigrant sensibilities that also defined the WCTU clearly complicated their position as an organization aimed to better society as a whole.

Yet, women's temperance speakers laid the groundwork for future changes in laws giving women legal rights to property, income, and their children. Their cause began with eliminating alcohol in the United States but as the WCTU gained strength in numbers and influence, their focus broadened to empowering women and children through anti-poverty social programs, pro-labor platforms, and woman's suffrage. The WCTU "forcefully and permissibly" participated in

²³ Bordin, *Women and Temperance*, 104-108.

²⁴ Lisa McGirr. *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 128-129.

²⁵ McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State*, 132.

public debate and established relief efforts for what they perceived as the societal concerns of utmost importance.²⁶

²⁶ Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women*, 38.

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