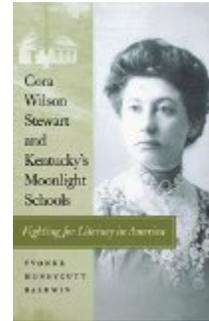


H-Net Reviews

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Yvonne Honeycutt Baldwin. *Cora Wilson Stewart and Kentucky's Moonlight Schools: Fighting for Literacy in America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006. ix + 248 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2378-3.

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Unbridled Spirit

The Commonwealth of Kentucky's new slogan celebrates an "unbridled spirit," replacing the previous administration's dubious "Education Pays." Dwelling at the bottom of most national rankings, Kentucky has long struggled with overwhelming poverty and underwhelming educational attainment. Yvonne Baldwin's portrait of one of Kentucky's great women leaders, Cora Wilson Stewart, unfolds against the backdrop of the state's failure to improve its economic and educational well-being.

Baldwin eloquently examines Stewart's contributions to the Progressive Era by chronicling her leadership in the formation of an adult education program in Kentucky. Stewart herself was often "unbridled," and yet her monumental efforts pay few dividends for Kentucky's substantial illiterate population today.

Cora Wilson Stewart and Kentucky's Moonlight Schools is an insider's view of the politics of the Progressive Era from a southern reformer's perspective. Like other reformers in the region, Stewart "embraced class-based ideals of uplift and progress that accepted, to some degree, the hierarchy of race and culture" (p. viii). The overarching theme for Stewart's reform effort was self-improvement, even though she knew this would mean changing families, local culture, and the economy. Readers of this biography become aware of the gambles that exist in everyday politics; Stewart usually did not know if a moment was a tipping point or an intermediate step toward success.

Cora Wilson Stewart and Kentucky's Moonlight

Schools is, primarily, a biography concerned with Stewart's own "commitment to self-improvement as a lifelong process" (p. 4). Baldwin focuses tightly on her subject, teasing out the riddles of Stewart's lifetime achievements and failures. Baldwin sometimes writes as much about her resources as she does about Stewart herself, wondering about the documents that too often hide rather than reveal what "shaped and sustained" Stewart (p. 6). The strength of this biography is in the depiction of the many different characters and organizations that touched the life of this indomitable woman. The personalities of both local and national leaders intertwine to help place Stewart's own forceful self within the context of contemporary reform movements and the resistance of Kentucky's corrupt politicians to them.

Born in eastern Kentucky in 1875, Stewart knew of the great women activists of her era and revered muckraker Ida Tarbell and pioneer social worker Jane Addams. Stewart came from a middle-class professional family and started her teaching career as much to satisfy her community's expectations as to provide an acceptable platform for her form of religious, social, and political activism. Her belief in education as the agent of radical change was shared by many reform-minded individuals in Kentucky. The Christian Church's missionary society had created the Morehead Normal School in 1887 with the idea that well-educated teachers would bring eastern Kentuckians up and out of the rural poverty and violence they experienced.

When Stewart stood for the elective office of county superintendent in 1909, she benefited from her family's social standing, even though by then she was divorced from her first husband. She quickly forged connections to important state organizations, such as the Kentucky Education Association and the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs, allies that sustained her rise in state and national leadership positions. For the women's club members, she clearly linked the education of rural women with the service ideal. For the education associations, she portrayed Kentucky adults as "mentally blind" individuals just waiting for the chance to have access to education in order to turn their lives around (p. 36).

As Baldwin makes clear, Stewart pragmatically responded to the politics of the moment in planning the Moonlight Schools (so named because classes were scheduled on moonlit nights to make travel easier and safer). She organized the campaign in schools and churches and even sent her volunteer teachers door-to-door to bring out the adults who wanted to go to school. Stewart expected 3-4 adults per school for a total of 150 in her first session in 1911, but nearly 1,200 people showed up. For the next 23 years the Moonlight Schools taught 700,000 adults. Each student "took home a vision" of a literate life, and the expectation was that "each one teach one" (pp. 42, 51). Stewart's political claim was to eradicate illiteracy, and her efforts relied on the benevolence of benefactors and volunteer teachers.

The Kentucky Illiteracy Council (KIC), founded in 1914, served as the organizational center for the movement. The KIC hoped for but never gained the full attention of the Kentucky legislature. Clubwomen, local politicians, clergy, teachers, and the press made up the

KIC's core network of moral, financial, and academic resources. The movement quickly spread to Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Arkansas during the next few years. Stewart's bold claim, "No Illiteracy after 1920" was heralded from church pulpits, theaters, newspapers, pamphlets, university lecture halls, and courthouse steps, but she lost out to the realities of the day. During the rise of the social sciences and the discipline of statistics, illiteracy was—and remains today—difficult to define or measure. Concludes Baldwin about Stewart's dream, "an idealistic, conflicted vision, it was impossible to attain" (p. 187).

Stewart represents the conflict many others encountered during the Progressive Era: the difficulty of imposing ideals from above so as to inspire change in a targeted community. Although Stewart accomplished little through the reform-minded Democratic Party or the state's usual funding mechanisms for education, she built an important and passionate local network in each community she touched. This is a lesson that today's education-minded policymakers ignore at their peril.

How wonderful when life and literature intersect—when historians write from their heart and hearth. Yvonne Baldwin lives and works in the region where Cora Stewart's important legacy remains cherished, although often known only in a superficial way. *Cora Wilson Stewart and Kentucky's Moonlight Schools: Fighting for Literacy in America* provides that unvarnished look at an important woman leader that makes her real and understandable from a local, regional, and national viewpoint. Baldwin recaptures an important legacy for an impoverished region of the United States still struggling with illiteracy.

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