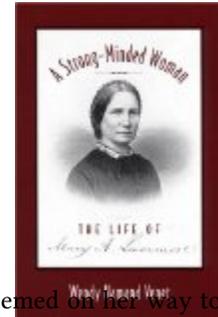


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wendy Hamand Venet. *A Strong-Minded Woman: The Life of Mary A. Livermore*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. xi + 319 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-514-2.

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Published on H-Minerva (October, 2007)



At one time the most highly paid and requested speaker on the lecture circuit, Mary Livermore was known for her dedication to the causes of woman suffrage and temperance. She edited a woman suffrage newspaper, *Woman's Journal* and wrote two autobiographies, but the next generation of women leaders underrated her career and saw her as too formal and old-fashioned. Today, if she is remembered at all, it is for her nursing work during the Civil War.

Because political historians tend to favor subjects with a convenient cache of archived letters and diaries, and since Livermore destroyed most of her personal papers, her life's work remained neglected for many years. With Wendy Hamand Venet's reconstruction of her life in this well-researched, well-written biography, the political and intellectual framework for the suffrage and temperance movements is restored to historiography. What emerges from Venet's research is a highly talented, highly effective woman leader—a superb organizer who served as president of three state and national suffrage associations as well as president of her state Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

A Yankee from Boston, Mary Rice's unusual early experiences centered on traveling to Virginia to tutor a wealthy family's children where she gained "financial and emotional independence" (p. 24). She saw first-hand the benefits of slavery to whites such as freedom from mundane housework, childcare, and cooking, but she also saw the dark sides of slavery, including slaves' vulnerability and treatment as "grown children" and "property." Indeed, Livermore devoted over one fourth of *The Story of My Life* to describing these three years. Returning to Duxbury, Massachusetts as the town schoolteacher, she married Daniel Livermore, a Univer-

salist minister, had children, and seemed on her way to becoming a traditional middle-class woman. Yet, she and her husband supported the abolitionists who moved to the Kansas inferno in 1857. Daniel Livermore visited Kansas briefly, but he and Mary moved to Chicago, where he edited a church newspaper and served as a missionary to rural areas.

When the Civil War broke out, Mary Livermore volunteered to help with the U.S. Sanitary Commission. Two commissions emerged to help with the wounded during the war, the U.S. Sanitary Commission and the U.S. Christian Commission, each with very different religious roots and goals and in competition for funds. While living in Chicago, Livermore designed and organized the Great Northwestern Fair to raise funds for the U.S. Sanitary Commission. She even persuaded President Abraham Lincoln to donate his original copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the fair raised \$86,000. The Civil War had changed Livermore's life, teaching her the power of publicity, planning, and persuasion.

Originally, Mary Livermore shunned the pulpit. She was not even sure that women should speak in public, but after her nursing work catapulted her to the limelight, she felt a responsibility to speak out about what she saw and believed. Such a stance labeled her as "strong-minded," or not performing a role befitting her traditional female status. Once the war was over Livermore began speaking in public about the evils of demon rum and the virtues of women. Women had an important perspective and should be heard, respected, and given the right to vote. She soon became the most requested speaker of her generation, the "Queen of the Platform." On average she spoke for an hour and a half to two hours, never consulting her notes. She traveled over 25,000 miles a year

to talk to audiences of middle-class men and women. For many it was the first time that they had heard a woman speak in public on any issue. In fact Livermore was considered one of the four best orators of her time and the only woman of the four.

Livermore was very involved in the fight that led to the split of the woman suffragists. She broke with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and joined the rival organization, the American Woman Suffrage Association, to promote the fifteenth amendment and suffrage for black men first. Stanton, Anthony, and the National Woman Suffrage Association wanted women to obtain the vote at the same time as black men, which turned out not to be possible to achieve. The two organizations reconciled and merged into one in the 1890s. When she moved back to Massachusetts Livermore soon became

president of the Massachusetts, then New England, and finally the American Woman Suffrage Association. She also presided over and spoke about improving women's financial and educational status at the Association for the Advancement of Women's first two conferences, called Woman's Congresses. In addition, she founded and became president of the Massachusetts WCTU.

Livermore was an active and effective leader, writer, and orator. Her work on behalf of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the promotion of women's suffrage, education, and economic advancement, as well as her work for temperance can now be appreciated by scholars, thanks to Venet's book. Hopefully other historians will build on Venet's work and flesh out other key leaders who were critical to these movement's successes but whose contributions have been forgotten.

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Citation: D Campbell. Review of Venet, Wendy Hamand, *A Strong-Minded Woman: The Life of Mary A. Livermore*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

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