H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Katherine G. Aiken**. *Harnessing the Power of Motherhood: The National Florence Crittenton Mission, 1883-1925.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998. xxiv + 266 pp. $38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-017-7.

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**Published on** H-SAWH (June, 1999)

## History with a Mission

The National Florence Crittenton Mission (NFCM) has provided maternity care and other social services for unmarried mothers and other women in need for more than a century. Beginning in 1883 with one home intended to "rescue" prostitutes, the NFCM eventually grew into a national chain of homes caring for thousands of unmarried mothers every year. During the course of the century, the philosophies and programs of the NFCM evolved with the times.

Historians have evaluated the NFCM and other maternity services before. Several very fine monographs have appeared in recent years, including important ones by Regina Kunzel, Ruth Alexander, Marian J. Morton, and Peggy Pascoe.[1] This literature has developed several major lines of interpretation. First, the Crittenton homes and other such facilities were the products of the middle-class women's culture of the late nineteenth century. The purposes behind these endeavors were multiple: middle-class, evangelical women founded these homes out of a sense of religious duty to help the less fortunate, out of a desire to engage in meaningful, non-traditional activities for themselves, and with a goal of challenging the double standard of sexual conduct. The maternity-home movement was part of the larger reform movement that culminated in Progressivism and the New Deal.

Second, the previous literature has argued that the maternity homes were strongly shaped by the maternalist philosophy of the middle-class women who ran them. These women contended that women's natural, biological (or God-given) traits uniquely qualified them for the care of the home and the family, and the reformers further argued that those same traits were needed for important work in the public realm as well, especially where the care of children and communities were concerned. Moreover, they insisted that motherhood was women's most important function and one that must be protected, respected, and honored. As such, the maternity homes that the middle-class women created would work to produce respect even for the unmarried mother, so long as she conducted herself in the "proper" (a.k.a "middle-class") manner. These maternity homes resisted the adoption of the newly emerging professional social-work standards because those standards often conflicted with the evangelical, maternalistic goals of the institutions.

Third, the historiography has focused on the social-control element of the homes. Like many other institutions, maternity homes worked to impose middle-class values on the poor and working class. They taught women to be good mothers, wives, and housekeepers. They demanded religious conversion of their charges, insisted on orderly facilities with docile, obedient residents, and trained the young women to accept their proper place in the urban proletariat.

And fourth, previous scholarship has demonstrated the ways in which the residents of maternity homes and other related institutions (such as reformatories) attempted to resist the control of their "keepers." Whether disrupting chapel services, staging a riot, or simply running away, the clients of these institutions attempted to extract from the homes the services they needed without practicing the values they did not share. The maternity homes, then, were sites of struggle between middle-class, evangelical matrons and their working-class, independent-minded clients.

Katherine Aiken enters this discussion with a book intended to redeem the redeemers. Aiken rejects the pre-

vious emphases on "social control," class tensions, and sectarian competition, arguing instead that the NFCM should be seen as a model of feminism, self-sacrifice by dedicated workers, and progressive thinking. The NFCM "fostered independence and self-esteem for its charges and its workers" (p. xxii) and stood "in the vanguard of progressive efforts on behalf of women and children" (p. 72). "While other historians have labeled Crittenton policies as backward and punitive," Aiken writes, "they were in fact on the cutting edge of development in social-welfare concerns for unmarried mothers..." (p. 80). Crittenton workers were motivated not by class tensions but by "a genuine regard for the well-being of others" (p. 103). Despite the "censure" of society, "Crittenton workers persevered and formed long-lasting relationships among themselves in the process" (p. 105).

Indeed, the Crittenton workers are the center of Aiken's story. Through their work with the NFCM, they become stronger, more self-confident, independent women leaders. Their struggles are recounted with great sympathy, and the focus of the book seldom strays elsewhere. The "inmates" of the homes, while making their presence felt occasionally, remain decidedly in the background. Whatever agency is expressed here is by the middle-class matrons and workers, not by the working-class residents of the homes.

Every criticism ever leveled at the NFCM (and there have been many) is herein refuted, deflected, explained away, or, in a few cases, just ignored. Where Regina Kunzel emphasized the movement's narrow focus on Christian conversion, Aiken insists that this view "short-changes [NFCM leader] Kate Waller Barrett and her accomplishments" (p. xviii). Where Kunzel pointed out that African-American women were forced to create their own separate maternity homes because Crittenton facilities were closed to them, Aiken responds that there were at least a couple of homes open to black women. ("Photographs provide irrefutable evidence that African Americans were included in Crittenton programs," p. 208.) Where Marian Morton charged that the religiously oriented maternity homes held out "long and hard" against professionalization, refusing to hire professional caseworkers even under great pressure to do so, Aiken retorts that Kate Waller Barrett pioneered in case work and should be seen as one of the founders and promoters of professional social work. Where Morton noted the Cleveland Crittenton home's reputation for dealing in "gray market" adoptions, causing a public scandal when the story broke in the 1940s, Aiken is silent.

Most of all, Aiken wishes to rehabilitate the reputation of Kate Waller Barrett, the head of the NFCM for decades. Barrett is the real hero of the story, and Aiken's tone is admiring and positive. Barrett "achieved considerable success in changing women's lives for the better" (p. 34). She was "willing to embrace new ideas and pursue any avenue that would better able Crittenton workers and inmates to adapt to a changing society" (p. 43). She was a selfless and dedicated reformer who became a nationally recognized leader in social-welfare policy. The only criticism that Aiken ever permits herself to make of Barrett is an acknowledgment that Barrett's desire to maintain full control over every aspect of the organization resulted in "administrative difficulties" (p. 180). *Harnessing the Power of Motherhood* comes very close to being a "great woman" history. Yet, curiously, Barrett does not emerge from these pages as a well-developed personality. Although her beliefs regarding sacred motherhood are made quite clear, the reader does not get a sense of who Barrett was or what her life outside of her work was like. This is strictly a public life.

The periodization of the study is problematic and unexplained. Although it purports to examine the Crittenton movement, the coverage ends with the death of Barrett in 1925. (A brief epilogue conveys the next fifty years of the organization's history in three pages.) Ending the story in 1925 might have been understandable if the book had been a biography of Barrett, but it is not. We don't find out what happens to the movement after the death of its guiding force or how the NFCM responds to the new needs of women in the era when social work became dominated by psychiatry. We don't learn whether the NFCM continues to pioneer in social work practice after the loss of its leader. The periodization, then, leaves many questions unanswered.

Another flaw lies in the absence of regional analysis. Although fully a third of Crittenton homes were located in southern cities, Aiken makes little of this fact. What small amount of attention is devoted to race and the NFCM is focused principally on midwestern cities. The opportunity to analyze race, region, and reform, which others have done with great sensitivity, has been neglected.[2] Nor does Aiken give much thought to ethnic or religious differences. While a great deal of work has been done in recent years on ethnicity and Progressive-era reform, ethnicity is not a category of analysis here.[3]

The book does have some strengths. It is thoroughly researched and plainly written. It should help draw new attention to one Progressive leader who has received less

analysis than many of her peers. It does not, however, open up any new areas of inquiry or explore any new methodologies. In short, it does little to push the discussion of maternity homes in any new directions. For the history of the National Florence Crittenton Mission, Aiken's book should probably be read in conjunction with Kunzel (or one of the others mentioned supra), in order to obtain both a critical assessment and its rebuttal.

Notes:

[1]. Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); Marian J. Morton, *And Sin No More: Social Policy and Unwed Mothers in Cleveland, 1855-1990* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2]. See, for example, Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), and Daniel Levine, "A Single Standard of Civilization: Black Private Social Welfare Institutions in the South, 1880s-1920s," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81 (Spring 1997), 52-77.

[3]. See, for example, Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and Ruth Crocker, *Social Work and Social Order: The Settlement Movement in Two Industrial Cities, 1889-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

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**Citation**: Elna C. Green. Review of Aiken, Katherine G., *Harnessing the Power of Motherhood: The National Florence Crittenton Mission, 1883-1925.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

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