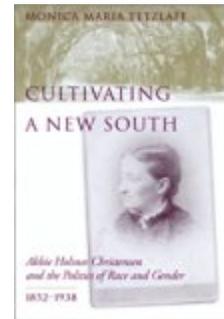


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Monica Maria Tetzlaff. *Cultivating a New South: Abbie Holmes Christensen and the Politics of Race and Gender, 1852-1938*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. xxi + 340 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-453-4.

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During the Civil War, northern missionaries and teachers began coming South to help former slaves make the transition from slavery to freedom. Twenty years later, a second transformation began when Henry Grady called for a New South that would have an economy based on industrialization. Abbie Holmes Christensen, whose life work is examined in Monica Tetzlaff's new biography, transcends both of these movements and serves as a lens by which women's activities in the New South can be examined. *Cultivating a New South: Abbie Holmes Christensen and the Politics of Race and Gender, 1852-1938* adds an important female dimension to the interpretation of the New South philosophy and the changes that it brought to the region.

In this elegantly written biography, Tetzlaff traces Christensen's development as an abolitionist, educator, suffragist, and socialist. The missionary zeal that brought her family to South Carolina was a defining characteristic of her long and active life. While Christensen's influence was mitigated by the restraints of her time and place, she left a lasting legacy through her vision of equal opportunity for all, her support for black education, and her publication of African-American folklore. Tetzlaff clearly demonstrates that Christensen contributed to the creation of a better New South.

Holmes was born in Massachusetts in 1852 to abolitionist parents. In 1864, when she was twelve, her parents decided to participate in the missionary program among freed slaves in Port Royal, South Carolina. Tetzlaff contends that the Port Royal experiment provided the seeds of the New South, considerably earlier than Henry Grady articulated his vision for the region.

Holmes returned to Massachusetts after the Civil

War to attend the Ipswich Female Seminary. When her mother was placed in an asylum because of numerous health problems, Holmes returned to South Carolina to teach and fill her mother's position in the household. For two years, she exclusively taught black children and rarely had any contact with white Southerners. In spite of the commitment of whites such as her parents to the uplifting of African Americans at Port Royal, class and race separated these families from the people they sought to help. These early experiences had a lasting impact on Holmes, encouraging her to support racial equality while also instilling in her a paternalistic attitude toward African Americans. It was in Port Royal that she heard first-hand the Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox stories.

When her father remarried, Holmes returned to Massachusetts to continue her education at Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary. There, Holmes developed leadership skills that she later applied to progressive causes, and she first wrote in the African-American dialect of the Sea Islands in a composition that she titled "The Tar Baby." This story was the first of the many Sea Islands legends that she wrote and later published, helping to preserve an important element of African-American culture while at the same time perpetuating some unfortunate stereotypes. Holmes's Tar Baby story was published in a Springfield, Massachusetts, newspaper in 1874, six years before Georgia writer Joel Chandler Harris published his version of the story in his *Uncle Remus Tales*. That same year, however, Holmes's stepmother died, leaving her father with several small children. Holmes abandoned plans to attend medical school and returned to South Carolina to resume her duties within her family. For the remainder of her life, she would "bridge North and South, striving to bring to Beaufort the tidy town life and female activism

of New England” (p. 67).

Upon her return to South Carolina, Holmes met and soon married Niels Christensen, a Union army veteran who had been a captain in the U.S. Colored Infantry in the last months of the Civil War. The following year, 1876, she gave birth to the first of her six children. Motherhood and family life consumed much of her energy in the years that followed. When her children were old enough to be educated, she spent part of each year in Boston so that the children could attend school there. According to Tetzlaff, an inheritance from an uncle gave Holmes Christensen independent money and a level of power in her marriage that most southern women did not enjoy.

During these years of child rearing, Holmes Christensen continued to collect African-American folk tales and in 1892 published *Afro-American Folk Lore as Told 'Round Cabin Fires on the Sea Islands of South Carolina*, a collection in the Gullah dialect. Holmes Christensen's book, however, was difficult to read and never received the widespread acclaim of the work of Harris. Holmes Christensen took great pride in the book, however, and today it is used by historians for insight into the culture created by black Sea Islanders.

Tetzlaff speculates that the handicaps Holmes Christensen faced as a female writer may have been the force that propelled her into the women's rights movement through participation in female voluntary associations. Holmes Christensen's interest in the work of women's associations brought together the experiences of her parents in the abolition movement and her Mount Holyoke education. Her commitment to the temperance movement was an outgrowth of her interest in spiritualism that had begun at Mount Holyoke, while her interest in

women's suffrage sprang from her parents' involvement in abolition.

After a hurricane hit the Sea Islands in 1893, Holmes Christensen abandoned folklore collecting and embraced the cause of education as the best way to address poverty in the South. Using the connections she had established with other women reformers, Holmes Christensen founded the Port Royal Agricultural School (later known as the Shanklin School after its African-American leaders, Joseph and India Shanklin), based on the model of the Hampton and Tuskegee institutes. In 1917, at the age of sixty-five, Holmes Christensen founded a Montessori school in her home as a pre-school for her grandchildren.

The attitudes of her children and grandchildren toward racial matters differed greatly from those of Holmes Christensen. Although her sons opposed lynching, they accepted Jim Crow segregation. Holmes Christensen urged her children to read the writings of W. E. B. DuBois, but her sons, who were active in South Carolina state politics, supported disfranchisement of African Americans.

An avid diarist and letter writer, Holmes Christensen left a set of rich primary sources, which Tetzlaff has fully used. Tetzlaff was also able to conduct several oral history interviews with Holmes Christensen's descendants and others associated with the Port Royal experiment. Tetzlaff does an excellent job of telling the story of Holmes Christensen's life within the broader story of Southern history. *Cultivating a New South* is a significant contribution to women's history that greatly increases our understanding of women who worked as reformers in the New South and encourages a more complete appreciation of southern literature during the postwar period.

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