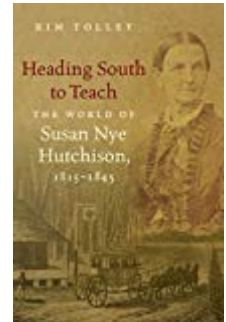


Kimberley Tolley. *Heading South to Teach: The World of Susan Nye Hutchison, 1815-1845.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 278 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-2433-4.



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In this illuminating work, Kimberley Tolley recaptures the experience of Susan Nye Hutchison (1790-1867), a New Yorker who spent a good portion of her adult life teaching in the South, first as a single woman looking to support herself, and then as a wife and widow responsible for providing for her family. Hutchison was just one of many Northerners who went South to teach and encountered slavery firsthand in the decades prior to the Civil War. But, at the same time, Hutchison's life was atypical. She remained in the South much longer than most Northern transplants, and, more notably, she maintained her teaching career while married, then as a wife estranged from her husband, and finally, as a widow. Previous scholarly work on nineteenth-century female teachers has been limited to those who taught in classrooms in New York and the West, and attention to teachers in the South has tended to focus on those women teaching during and immediately after the Civil War. Hutchison, however, taught for three decades before the Civil War and her ex-

periences thus offer a counter to other historical accounts. In showing the ways that Hutchison's life experience is both ordinary and extraordinary, Tolley offers great insight into the experience of American women, American educational history, and religious history.

Hutchison's teaching career in the South began in 1815, when, as an unmarried woman in her mid-twenties, she endured a harrowing three-week journey to Raleigh, North Carolina. Tolley traces Hutchison's preparation for a career in teaching, outlining how her education occurred against the backdrop of Enlightenment ideas and, as importantly, the Second Great Awakening. Hutchison's motivation to travel south was as much religious as economic, for, as Tolley convincingly argues, teaching offered her a "socially acceptable way" to both support herself and engage in "lay ministry" (p. 26). In portrayals of female teachers in New York and the West, it was often not religion but rather, as historians like Polly Welts Kaufman and Joanne Preston have de-

scribed, prescriptive domestic ideology that allowed them some independence as teachers.[1] Hutchison was of a different type, using teaching not only as an escape from dependence, but also as a missionary endeavor. More than teachers in New York and the West, she matches Catharine Beecher's prescriptive ideal of a teacher guided by the desire to offer maternal nurturing to students.

The education that Hutchison provided at the Raleigh Academy—and later, at other schools in multiple North Carolina locations—was demanding and not the ornamental education sometimes associated with Southern female education, Tolley points out. Hutchison taught reading and grammar alongside mathematics (a sometimes controversial enterprise) and chemistry. Her students designed chemistry experiments, and their performances at examinations helped establish Hutchison's reputation as a rigorous, sound educator—a reputation that would ensure her survival for decades to come when she could rely on it to return to work as a teacher and schoolmaster.

Her life and choices were shaped by—and constrained by—her marriage to a man whom Tolley characterizes, perhaps generously, as “an abusive wastrel” (p. 1). In 1825, thirty-five-year-old Susan Nye consented to marry widower Adam Hutchison. In addition to the stepdaughters she gained, she gave birth to four sons, and the rest of her life was shaped around protecting them at all costs. Having seen her husband fly into a rage weeks prior to the marriage, Hutchison knew that she was getting no prize. Tolley speculates that, given her age, the security that marriage offered outweighed any warning bells in Hutchison's head. An emerging ideal of companionate marriage was often tempered by actual experience and, as importantly, by the legally subordinate status of wives. Adam kept his family on a financial precipice, to such an extent that he submitted to allowing his wife to return to teaching. Even with her teaching earnings, the Hutchisons were

barely able to make ends meet, and at one point Susan Hutchison returned home to find that her furniture was to be auctioned. Adam was also abusive, and Susan Hutchison's hardships were such that she made the wrenching decision to send her eldest sons home to New York to be raised in better circumstances.

In 1833, Hutchison, too, returned to New York, this time as a Mrs. Adam Hutchison, a wife officially estranged from her husband. Tolley argues that marriage was both a private and a public matter in her Presbyterian community, as the church body “closely monitored men and women's behavior” (p. 108). Hearing rumors of Adam Hutchison's abuse, the church ultimately determined that he was “derelict in his duty as a husband” (p. 120.) In his abuse and, even more so, in his financial failing and exploitation of his wife as breadwinner, he reversed gender roles in a way that the church body found unacceptable. Susan Hutchison, they determined, thus had the moral right to leave her marriage. The importance of this cannot be overstated: this decision ensured that, upon her return to the classroom, she was given a man's salary since she supported her own family, an acknowledgment and further sanctioning of the gender role reversal within her family.

Adam Hutchison died the year after his wife left him, and Susan Hutchison gained new status as a widow. After teaching in New York and continuing to struggle financially, she again left her sons behind and returned South. Tolley traces Hutchison's transformation from “nearly destitute widow in New York to successful North Carolina educator” (p. 129). Hutchison first headed a school in Raleigh, then moved to Salisbury, and finally, to Charlotte for better opportunities. Her success was complete when she was able to enroll her sons at Davidson College. Ultimately, Tolley argues, “her position as respected head of a female academy was as close to equity as any woman could achieve in any field or occupation in antebellum society” (p. 186).

As a New Yorker, Hutchison knew of slavery, and she was shaped in her education by reading and teaching Reverend William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, which argued that slavery was against the law of nature and advocated gradual emancipation and benevolent treatment of slaves. But as a teacher in the South (one teaching Paley, no less), Hutchison encountered both the brutality of slavery and slaves themselves, and these experiences shaped her evolving ideas about slavery, and her willingness to question the Southern system. Soon after her arrival in the South, Hutchison came face to face with the cruelty of slavery, hearing of the horrific death of a slave named Stephen on July 4, 1815. When a series of fires raised fears of slave insurrection in 1829, two enslaved women, Jenny and Cinda, were arrested, and Hutchison visited Jenny in jail prior to her execution. Over time, Hutchison's early belief that the religious conversion of slaveowners would lead to the end of slavery diminished. In her final years in the South, she was secretly teaching slaves to read. By the onset of the Civil War, Hutchison was no longer keeping a diary, however, and so we miss insight into her thoughts on the war or the demise of American slavery.

Heading South to Teach is a good example of the power of a microhistorical approach to the study of history. Microhistory, Tolley writes, is a way of "research that 'asks large questions in small spaces'" (p. 11). Hutchison kept a diary over the span of thirty years, and, reminiscent of the treatment Laurel Thatcher Ulrich gave to the diary of the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century midwife Martha Ballard, Tolley fleshes out Hutchison's life and historical context through contemporary correspondence, religious tracts, educational treatises (including one written by Hutchison herself), textbooks, and legal records. Tolley is sensitive to what her sources allow as well as to what they do not allow her to know. She describes her microhistory as operating on two levels, first as the story of "an ordinary yet re-

markable woman who turned to teaching as a meaningful way to earn a living" and second, as a work about "the significance of religion and education" in antebellum America (p. 2). Tolley succeeds in addressing both.

Of particular interest is Tolley's discussion of the way in which Susan Nye Hutchison balanced work and domesticity, which notes that Hutchison's "experiences would be familiar to many working women in the twenty-first century" (p. 2). As much as the community sanctioned Hutchison's position as a working mother, she was also a victim of their judgment of her. At one point, Tolley recounts how her performance as a mother "became grist for the gossip mill," as community members criticized her ability to govern her own children during church services (p. 97). Ambition was also a suspect quality in a woman, and Hutchison had to walk a fine line, particularly as public education widened in the South and she sought state sponsorship for her school. Perhaps this tension, as much as Hutchison's dislike of slavery and growing sectionalism (in the Presbyterian church and broader country), contributed to her decision to return to New York in the late 1840s, where she lived out the remainder of her life.

Susan Nye Hutchison emerges from Kimberley Tolley's meticulous research and engaging account as a woman of great depth, one who made great sacrifices on behalf of her children, who took risks to teach enslaved African Americans to read, and who managed to find her way out of tremendous financial, legal, and marital constraints and achieve economic success. Profoundly shaped by her religion, Hutchison wanted to make herself useful in the world as much as she wanted to earn a living. It is no wonder that Tolley confides in her introduction that she "admired her grit" (p. 3). *Heading South to Teach* will be of use in a variety of graduate courses on education, religion, and of course women's history, as well as

to women's historians and Southern historians alike.

Notes

[1]. Jo Anne Preston, "Domestic Ideology, School Reformers, and Female Teachers: Schoolteaching Becomes Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century New England," *The New England Quarterly* 66 (December 1993): 531-551; Polly Welts Kaufman, *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[2]. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

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