

**H. Paul Thompson Jr.** *A Most Stirring and Significant Episode: Religion and the Rise and Fall of Prohibition in Black Atlanta, 1865-1887.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. Illustrations. xiv + 338 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-458-3.



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**Published on** H-SHGAPE (December, 2013)

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## Religion, Race, and Temperance in Postbellum Atlanta

H. Paul Thompson Jr.'s book, *A Most Stirring and Significant Episode: Religion and the Rise and Fall of Prohibition in Black Atlanta, 1865-1887*, offers a new look at the relationship between religion and race in the temperance movement. Thompson argues that the temperance movement grew out of an antebellum evangelical reform nexus in the Northeast (p. 7). These reformers gradually spread their religious and temperance beliefs to southern blacks. African Americans in Atlanta subsequently organized their own institutions to promote these ideas, particularly with the goal of improving the lives of blacks and local race relations. Though black Atlantans supported temperance in the first city referendum in 1885, Thompson argues that they rejected prohibition two years later because they saw little improvement in their situation. Thompson demonstrates that the temperance movement and evangelical religious thought shaped politics, religion, and race relations in postbellum Atlanta.

*A Most Stirring and Significant Episode* has two parts. Part 1, "Messengers from the North," details the evan-

gelical reform nexus that Thompson argues formed the foundation of the temperance movement that later swept black Atlanta. This evangelical reform nexus, dating back to the first decades of the nineteenth century, refers to "that unique intersection of religious practice, theology, and ideology, which coalesced during the Second Great Awakening ... [that] produced the culture of the people who brought the temperance message to black Atlanta" (p. 16). Evangelicals believed that abstention from alcohol increased one's purity and enabled religious conversion, and Thompson emphasizes the interconnectedness of these two beliefs. Most important, leaders and organizations emerged in support of temperance from this evangelical reform nexus, first among white reformers in the North and then among southern African Americans. Northern reformers spread their message to Atlanta's black population especially through missionary schools, literature, and churches.

Part 2, "Reformers in the South," argues that African Americans took up the cause of temperance as a result of this northern influence. Northern white clergy-

men and educators, for example, encouraged newly freed blacks to abstain from alcohol as part of their racial uplift efforts, and African American reformers soon took up the cause. In 1885, local white temperance advocates worked alongside black activists to ensure victory in that year's referendum. These interracial efforts, Thompson argues, encouraged African Americans to believe that temperance would improve race relations. The support of black Atlantans proved crucial for the measure's passage. When voters went to the polls for another referendum in 1887, however, African Americans voted against temperance. Thompson asserts that they believed that prohibition would improve race relations and access to the "better classes," a group of blacks with higher status based on education and family connections rather than income (p. 8). These promises of prohibition proved empty, which led to a backlash from the black community and the defeat of prohibition.

Thompson argues for the long roots of the temperance movement and the importance of religion for reformers. His emphasis on evangelical reform in the development of the temperance movement sheds new light on the movement's origins and growth. Though current Progressive Era literature often focuses on the rise of the state, this book highlights the trajectory of intellectual and cultural motivations that turned a temperance movement into legalized prohibition. *A Most Stirring and Significant Episode* convincingly argues that historians need to recognize the significance of religion to this movement. Thompson's work also suggests that historians of this period should further consider the precursors to this era of reform.

Thompson's discussion of evangelical reformers in the North demonstrates the significance of this group in the birth of the temperance movement. The narrative, however, does not address how southern religious and temperance leaders and organizations influenced temperance sentiment. Thompson details the rise of local African American leaders and organizations to promote temperance, highlighting the growth of a black political and cultural elite. While this narrative illuminates the establishment of African American social hierarchies in the postwar period, more analysis of the movement beyond

the black community in Atlanta would have given the reader a fuller understanding of the rise of temperance in this city. Further discussion of white southern temperance advocates would have showcased the differences or similarities between the white and black southern temperance reformers. Finally, it is worth noting that Georgia was the first state to enact prohibition, in 1908. The support or rejection of black Atlantans for Georgia's law seems like an important final piece that this book could have covered.

Thompson rarely acknowledges women's activism as central to his story. The author only briefly alludes to local women's efforts. His appendix of biographical sketches of temperance leaders, for example, includes only two white women, and they were not from the South. Female activists often participated in Atlanta's temperance and women's rights movements, incorporating rhetoric that emphasized the dangers of drunken husbands and fathers for women and families.<sup>[1]</sup> Analysis of this rhetoric would have strengthened Thompson's argument that the black community initially viewed temperance as a way to enter the better classes. Given that the Woman's Christian Temperance Union had a chapter for African American women in Atlanta dating to 1880, in what ways did black women shape the narrative of the movement? Did the views of black female leaders and organizations mirror those of their male counterparts?

*A Most Stirring and Significant Episode*, overall, points to the significant influence of antebellum evangelical thought on this Progressive Era reform movement. Thompson's work illuminates black society and affirms the political power of African American voters in Atlanta in the 1880s. The work will be useful for scholars of religion, nineteenth-century reform movements, race relations, and the establishment of the black community in Atlanta.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Manhood Lost: Fallen Drunkards and Redeeming Women in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

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**Citation:** Allison K. Lange. Review of Thompson Jr, H. Paul, *A Most Stirring and Significant Episode: Religion and the Rise and Fall of Prohibition in Black Atlanta, 1865-1887*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. December, 2013.

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