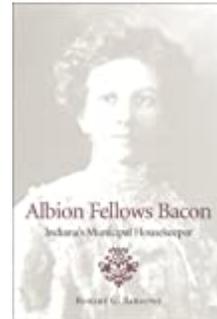


Robert G. Barrows. *Albion Fellows Bacon: Indiana's Municipal Housekeeper.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. xx + 229 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33774-0.



Reviewed by Dawn Michele Dyer ()

Published on H-Indiana (June, 2001)

“To Give Unto Them Beauty for Ashes”: The Work of Reformer Albion Fellows Bacon

In this fascinating work, Robert Barrows analyzes the life of social reformer Albion Fellows Bacon. Focusing on themes and patterns, this account is more an interpretative biography than a chronological narrative. The author sheds light on Bacon's involvement in such progressive causes as tenement reform, child welfare, and city planning. He clearly demonstrates how Bacon's religious sentiments compelled her to assume an activist role in a myriad of community and charitable organizations. Although Barrows characterizes Bacon as an “inadvertent feminist,” he argues that her work as a municipal housekeeper had a “feminist aspect” that advanced gender equality (p. 173). This thesis is supported through keen insights gleaned from sources ranging from journals to speeches. In addition to his impressive archival research, he also draws from a rich array of secondary literature.

Albion Fellows Bacon: Indiana's Municipal Housekeeper commences with a revealing examination of Bacon's early life. Born in 1865 in Evansville, Indiana, Albion Fellows was the daughter of Reverend Albion Fellows, a Methodist minister, and Mary Erskine Fellows, who became a widow on 4 March 1865. Unable to matriculate in college because of financial hardships, Albion be-

came a secretary for her great uncle, Judge Asa Iglehart, where she taught herself shorthand, obtained knowledge about legal records, and developed business acumen. After working as a private secretary and court reporter, she and her sister Annie took a “Grand Tour” of Europe, which included visits to Ireland, Scotland, England, Holland, Brussels, Switzerland, and France. On 11 October 1888, she married dry goods merchant Hilary Bacon and assumed what she referred to as a “sheltered life” that revolved around “my husband, my housekeeping, flowers, music, reading, my friends, and a pleasant social round” (p. 23). Like many middle-class Victorian women, Bacon eschewed her career upon marriage and instead focused upon household affairs.

Despite this apparent domestic bliss, Barrows convincingly demonstrates that Bacon was not content. Disagreeing with historian Roy Lubove's contention that Bacon's life was limited to her comfortable middle-class life, Barrows points to Bacon's illness in 1890 as proof that she yearned for more.[1] Suffering from nervous prostration, Bacon's illness was the result of insufficient intellectual stimulation Barrows posits. It was not until Bacon completed *Songs Ysame* (1897), a collection of poems, with her sister and assumed a more active role in the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society that she regained her health. Her social conscience was further aroused when she vis-

ited her daughter's school where she was appalled by the dismal conditions surrounding the school; the poverty and uncleanness of some of the school's students encouraged her to grapple with the problems of rampant urbanization and industrialization that blighted Evansville. It was this event, according to Barrows, that compelled her to join the Civic Improvement Association, read Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), and tour the factory district of Evansville. She began participating as a volunteer in social welfare associations such as the Friendly Visitors, the Visiting Nurse's Circle, the Flower Mission, and the Working Girls' Association. Bacon's primary concern, Barrows contends, was housing reform. To this end, she authored a tenement housing law, which the Indiana legislature passed in 1909. For the next few years, Bacon wrote considerably and traveled extensively speaking on the need for strict tenement housing measures. Throughout this section of the book, Barrows details the resistance Bacon faced as she worked tirelessly for the passage of the 1913 housing bill and the 1917 "death trap" law.

Next, Barrows delves intelligently into Bacon's concern for child welfare. Challenging historians who claim that World War I sounded the death knell for progressivism, Barrows effectively argues that the progressive's clarion call for social justice burgeoned in the 1920s. Offering a revisionist interpretation, Barrows utilizes Bacon's campaign to help underprivileged children to demonstrate how social reformers were able to couch their demands in patriotic language. He reveals how Bacon was shrewdly able to draw from wartime rhetoric to illustrate that the nation's strength depended upon the health and welfare of its children. Refuting historian David Kennedy's contention that state councils were of little significance, Barrows describes the important work spearheaded by the women's sections within the state councils.[2] Specifically, he notes Bacon's valuable work as chair for the Child Welfare Committee to ensure that school-age children stayed in the classroom. She promoted a Weighing and Measuring Children Drive to improve the health of Indiana's youngest citizens, and she championed the concept of juvenile probation as an alternative to incarceration. The 1920s were also marked by Bacon's interest in city planning and zoning. Findings culled from Plan Commission minutes to newspaper articles attest to Bacon's role in promoting recreational facilities, endorsing standards for living quarters, encouraging restrictions on property development, advancing efforts to beautify Evansville, and supporting improved public transportation.

Careful to note that Bacon was a woman of considerable talents, he devotes a chapter to assessing her prose, poetry, and pageants. He pays particular attention to her most famous work, *Beauty for Ashes* (1914), which chronicles "the evolution of a housing reformer" and proselytizes for more strict housing ordinances. Especially noteworthy in this chapter is Barrow's depiction of Bacon's profound religiosity. Portraying Bacon as a devout Christian, Barrows persuasively argues that her primary motivation for her civic and charitable work was her deeply held religious convictions. He concludes this chapter by averring that Bacon's writing is a "testament to her creativity, mental agility, and self-discipline" as well marshalling all her talents to help those less fortunate (p. 166).

When Albion Fellows Bacon died in 1933, her obituary did not list any affiliations with groups primarily focused on women's advancement. Barrows employs this obituary to observe perceptively that Bacon spent little time writing and speaking on strictly feminist issues such as suffrage. Relishing her duties in the private sphere, Bacon valued her role as wife and mother and tended to the family hearth throughout her life. Barrows maintains that Bacon's feminism was "unintentional"; she viewed the ballot as a means to eradicate social evils rather than as an inherent right (p. 172). Nonetheless, her appearances before the legislature, her public speaking, her articles in support of housing reform, and her association in a plethora of volunteer agencies did advance the cause of women to a degree. Barrows therefore borrows Barbara Springer's phrase "ladylike reformers" to characterize Bacon, who drew strength from her domestic responsibilities to fulfill a civic role and work in the public sphere. Her involvement with various reform organizations became an outlet for her energies and talents and was based on her religious views (p. 173). Although Bacon's work made inroads in the public sphere, Barrows does not fully explain how Bacon's "inadvertent feminism" failed to expand significantly the opportunities for lower-class women who did not have the time and luxuries afforded to Bacon and her middle and upper-class cohorts. Bacon did not confront inequality in the private sphere nor did she institutionalize women's achievements.

Although Barrows draws from Bacon's writing to claim she was altruistic, it is unclear whether her concern for the poor was paternalistic. Did she actively involve the poor in the decisions and laws that so acutely affected them? Was she able to bridge the gap between the classes? To what extent did her environmental determinism and

reliance on restrictionist legislation oversimplify complicated issues? These unanswered questions are another way of stating that Barrows' book illuminates and raises critical questions. This thought-provoking account contains well-chosen quotes and perspective analysis, and it is supplemented by intriguing pictures, extensive notes and a helpful bibliography. This meticulously researched biography supplies a missing link in the story of progressivism by recounting the contributions of a "second-tier" reformer. Anyone interested in women's history, progressivism, or religious history would be well advised to add this work to his or her reading list.

[1]. Roy Lubove, "Albion Fellows Bacon and the Awakening of a State," *Midwest Review* (1962).

[2]. David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York, 1980).

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Citation: Dawn Michele Dyer. Review of Barrows, Robert G., *Albion Fellows Bacon: Indiana's Municipal Housekeeper*. H-Indiana, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

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