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Carolyn J. Lawes. *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. x + 265 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2131-4.

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Gender and Class in Antebellum Women's Reform

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Carolyn J. Lawes' study of women's reform in antebellum Worcester, Massachusetts is an insightful contribution to women's history which argues that gendered interests characterized women's activism and united women across class, religious, and (sometimes) racial boundaries in antebellum communities. Classic studies of women's reform, including Nancy Hewitt's *Women's Activism and Social Change* and Mary Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class*, emphasize the connection between middle-class identity and women's benevolent work.[1] Lawes demonstrates that in Worcester, women joined churches, sewing societies, and other charitable endeavors in order to assert their power and presence in the public sphere. Rather than serving as vehicles of class interest, their charities engaged seriously with the economic, political, and social problems of the market revolution, offering sensitive and flexible support to women and children buffeted by economic changes, migration, illness and death. Another challenger to the continued dominance of separate spheres ideology in nineteenth-century women's history, Lawes contends that middle-class women "were at the center of community life and leadership" (p. 3).

Each of Lawes' chapters examines a different type of women's association, beginning with the Congregational Calvinist Church. Three women, Rebecca and Sarah Waldo and Elizabeth Salisbury, were instrumental in forming this church in 1820, after expressing dissatisfaction with the new pastor of the First Church, their original congregation. Though their wealth enabled these non-voting members of the church to make their opinions heard, Lawes argues that gender was a more important factor in this intradenominational dispute. The Waldos and Salisbury were unhappy that women's numerical dominance in the congregation did not translate into real power. Accordingly, women's unofficial power was given official status in the Calvinist Church. Before any new minister could be hired, the women of the congregation had to approve. Although voting was perhaps unique to the Calvinist Church, Lawes explains that women's fund-raising abilities and participation in disciplinary proceedings made them a force in their congregations.

Women's interests were not separate from their class

position, but in all church groups and reform associations, women considered gender in conducting their business. Contrary to historians who believe women's associations increasingly ceded power to men after 1850, Lawes demonstrates that women designed their organizations in order to give themselves maximum authority.[2] One sewing circle established a de facto "men's auxiliary" (p. 63), consisting of the men who eagerly attended the social gatherings held after the business of the circle was conducted. The women instructed the men to pay dues and become honorary members if they wished for female companionship. The women of the Worcester Children's Friend Society (CFS) created a board of twelve male advisors, who had no voting rights and met only when asked by the female managers of the CFS. Lawes points out that the male advisors served the practical purpose of offering free legal and business advice, and could be called in when the home was in need of repair. The Children's Friend Society became more than a women's benevolent society; after its incorporation in 1849, the organization served a significant public policy function as the only child welfare agency in Worcester (p. 139). The women of the CFS expanded women's political presence in a concrete way.

Gender united the women managers of the CFS with the women they sought to help, including both native-born women and Irish Catholic immigrants (their interactions with Worcester's African-American community were minimal). Like the women who surrendered their children to the society, the middle-class managers had usually experienced the death of a child, the ravages of ill health, and dramatic change in their economic circumstances. As Lawes points out, "more than one in four members of the CFS knew first-hand the uncertainty and social embarrassment of bankruptcy" (p. 98), reminding her readers that middle-class status is not something historians should presume. As a result, the managers were willing to let women place their children in the CFS home temporarily, usually until a member of the family recovered from an illness, or the parents found employment. Recognition of women's economic vulnerability also united the women of the CFS with the feminist movement, as evidenced by their participation in the national women's rights conventions in their city.

Inspired by feminist arguments for economic equality and the dependency of women in their own community, women reformers founded the Worcester Female Employment Society (FES) in 1855, in hopes of providing poor women a means to support themselves and their families. After paying hundreds of women to sew garments, the founders of the FES discovered that women could not earn enough in this traditional female employment to become self-sufficient. The FES began to urge all women to learn a skill so they could support themselves.

Lawes reaffirms that reality, not ideology, dictated women's lives, and shows the importance of gender to antebellum women's reform. In addition, Lawes' book expands our understanding of women's political culture, although she does not directly engage the term.[3] She demonstrates that women's organizations in Worcester had overlapping membership, which crossed lines of religious affiliation, and husband's employment and income level. Lawes suggests that local reform should not be considered separately from national movements, and she questions categories of radical and conservative activism. She cautions us to take seriously the activism of all women, from the missionary sewing circle to the Female Employment Society. The middle-class women of Worcester recognized that they had a stake in the politics and economy of their local community and the nation. As women, they sought to contribute to the moral and economic well being of society.

Lawes presents a fine study, written in an engaging style, and my only criticism is that she leaves the reader wanting more. In her chapter on the Female Employment Society, Lawes describes the FES as short-lived, but she does not tell the reader when or why the organizers of the FES decided to end their efforts. Her emphasis on gender unity also causes her to ignore possible religious, political, and class differences among women. Her fascinating comparison of sewing circles to political parties suggests that competing interests may be an important part of this story (p. 45). Finally, Lawes indicates that the Civil War had an enormous impact on women's activism. By restricting her study to 1860, she misses the opportunity to address the question of whether or not the Civil War restricted or expanded women's reform.[4] But in leaving the reader hungry for more, Lawes' book raises important questions about women's reform, local and national governance, and the relationship between public and private.

Notes

[1]. Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York 1822-1872* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge niversity Press, 1981).

[2]. According to Lawes, these include Hewitt and

Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1984). See also Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).

[3]. For example, Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds. *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[4]. See Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*; Elizabeth D. Leonard, *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (New York: Norton, 1994); Joan Waugh, *Unsentimental Reformer: The Life of Josephine Shaw Lowell* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women 's Politics in Transition* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).

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