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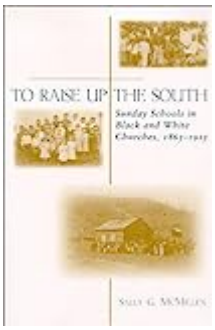

Sally G. McMillen. *To Raise up the South: Sunday Schools in Black and White Churches, 1865-1915.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. xviii + 297 pp. $54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2749-0.

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Uncovering a Visible Institution

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The pervasiveness of the Sunday school and the assumption among many that it is an essential feature of Southern religious life has, surprisingly, not led to previous, close, book-length inspections. Twenty-five years ago Albert Raboteau wrote about antebellum slave churches as "invisible" institutions; white and black Sunday schools have been far more visible, yet we as scholars know surprisingly little about them. [1] Perhaps indicative of this conundrum is the fact that although "Sunday School" tallies nearly forty entries in the index to the *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, it has no major entry under its own title. [2] Writing in 1997, historian Elizabeth Hayes Turner lamented that "astoundingly little has been written about Sunday schools . . . in the New South." Since that time, a number of historians have offered tantalizing glimpses of the role of the post-bellum Southern Sunday school in passing, but few have stopped for a close inspection. [3]

Sally G. McMillen's *To Raise Up the South* is an informative answer for this lacunae, but it is also much more than simply a gap-filler. In the introduction, McMillen modestly disclaims any effort to write "a religious history of the South" (xiv). Nevertheless, her investigation of Southern Sunday schools reveals much about the region and its (Protestant) religion between the Civil War and the First World War. McMillen's work tells us much about how Sunday school classes operated, but even more about the new opportunities the Sunday school provided church women for leadership roles, how the market for Sunday school materials drove denominations to build publishing houses which in turn encouraged more Sunday school growth, how similar or different black and white Sunday schools were, and how the growth of Southern-controlled Sunday schools in the later nineteenth century increased rather than diminished denominational and sectional tensions.

McMillen begins *To Raise Up the South* by explaining the importance Protestant Christians placed on Sunday schools in the post-Civil War South. Sunday school boosters made great claims for the power of the institution, not just in children's lives but in rebuilding the South by shaping "children into responsible, upstanding Christians" and members of society (7). These goals

may have seemed especially important in a war-torn and weary South, but McMillen also does an admirable job of situating the rise of Southern Sunday schools within the national, even trans-Atlantic boom in Protestant Sunday schools, the nineteenth-century emergence of the child study movement, and the post-Civil War interest in providing both secular and religious education for white and black Southern pupils. McMillen asserts that a close examination of the history of Southern Sunday schools, the lessons their directors sought to teach, and the relationship to the larger Sunday school movement are a good text for investigating old questions of "southern exceptionalism" and sectionalism in the first New South (xiv, 244).

Declaring that "neither 'state lines, nor sectional hatreds, nor complexion of man' " could dissuade them, many Northern missionaries from the American Sunday School Union and other agencies blanketed the South during and soon after the war in efforts to establish Sunday schools and sell religious literature (26). At the same time, McMillen suggests, many southerners and Sunday school promoters hoped "to see the region bury past misunderstandings" and "bind the country together" through common religious activity (24-25). But not surprising for a country just emerging from a bloody civil war, questions arose about what, or whose vision of the Southern future Sunday schools should attempt to instill in the rising generation.

In discussing the role of Sunday schools in post-war sectionalism, McMillen covers much of the same territory trod by Daniel Stowell in a chapter of his 1998 work on the "Religious Reconstruction of the South." Southern Christians, Stowell argues, "understood that the perpetuation of their distinctive religious identity depended on their success at transmitting cultural ideals to the next generation." Southern Sunday schools, he explains, were to be among "the primary instruments used to accomplish this goal." Southern religious leaders established Sunday schools immediately after the war and intended for them to perpetuate regional and denominational differences. Stowell backs up these claims with quotations from denominational editors and Sunday school directors. [4]

McMillen disagrees with Stowell, suggesting that there was a difference between denominational pronouncements and Sunday school reality in the early post-bellum South (112 n.41). In those first years, she explains, most "southerners who desired a Christian education for their children concluded that it was more important to have their offspring in Sunday school than quibble over who was conducting this good work" (53). Southern white resentment was more likely to emerge as some Northern Sunday school missionaries were seen to be aggravating racial issues, specifically in their outreach to freedmen and other Southern blacks. Even then, McMillen suggests, the "majority" of Northern missionaries "carried on Sunday school work with surprisingly little hassle" (52). If there was any denunciation of missionary efforts for white pupils, McMillen explains, it was more likely from the mouths and pens of "southern church leaders" than by the regular parents/church members or "those most directly affected by Sunday schools" (52).

Despite the pleas of church leaders for regional or denominational loyalty, McMillen suggests that in the first years after the war "many southerners felt only lukewarm (if any) loyalty to a particular denomination, especially when it came to Sunday schools" (29). For this assertion, McMillen provides only one reference: a published journal of an Alabama farmer that reveals visits to several different churches other than his own Baptist church. [5] Given the frequent situation in rural churches of infrequent (bi-weekly, monthly, or even more irregularly scheduled, depending on the circuit or local conditions) preaching, it may not be surprising for rural southerners to take advantage of whatever preaching or teaching was available. But this does not necessarily translate into a lack of denominational loyalty. In some ways McMillen's own evidence contradicts her point. She quotes from the 1867 report of an exasperated (Northern) American Sunday School Union agent, Isaac Emory, in which he noted that southerners were willing to accept free materials from him, but if they had to spend money they would only buy from their own denominations (43).

Historians of religion are often concerned about questions of evidence in evaluating social movements. Sermons, reports of denominational agencies or committees, religious newspapers and tracts, and even Sunday School materials can provide a wealth of insight into denominational affairs and theological movements but leave one on shaky ground when writing about how denominational policy translated into local implementation or how those in the pews received the message from the pulpit. McMillen attempts to overcome this obstacle with available published and manuscript memoirs; more impressive, however, is her use of the apparently voluminous correspondence of the American Sunday School Union agents who traveled the South in the late nineteenth century for their northern-based publish-

ing house.

McMillen mines this correspondence to provide a much more colorful description than previously presented in volumes focused on denominational activity, though not one without problems. Despite her warnings to treat the correspondence "with care," she at times lapses into the language of her sources. For example, when summarizing accounts from "[t]he Appalachian region," McMillen writes about "children who smoked or chewed tobacco" and "southern preachers . . . as ill-bred as members of their congregations" some of whom "were known bigamists; others preached while drunk" (35-36). Readers curious to check these claims will not find citations provided.

The third chapter of *To Raise Up the South* describes Southern-led efforts to build and sustain Sunday schools after 1865. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, white Southern Protestants became "worried that their children might fall into the hands of a 'wrong' church" (61) – for Southern white Methodists, the "wrong" church could be either Northern Methodist or Southern Baptist – and became more diligent in founding and sustaining regional and denominational Sunday schools. The post-Reconstruction South experienced a blossoming of these native-run schools so that the Sunday school became an apparently typical Southern institution. But, McMillen asks, how did Northern and Southern schools really compare? Were Southern Sunday schools more popular than their Northern counterparts? Compiling tables detailing by state the number and growth of Sunday schools, pupils, and teachers in the early twentieth century, McMillen concludes that Southern Sunday schools grew more quickly than their Northern counterparts in the decades under study, although she admits that this discrepancy is probably explained by the significant head start enjoyed by the Northern schools (227 n.5). (A more telling statistic, perhaps, would have been to compare Sunday school attendance as a percentage of total population between the regions.)

Were Southern Sunday schools teaching a different, or uniquely Southern message? During and soon after the Civil War several Southern denominational leaders voiced concerns about Sunday school materials printed by Northern publishers that had questionable "doctrinal bases" and were "prejudicial to our political, social and religious sentiments" (94). Despite such complaints, McMillen suggests that the differences in the Sunday school literature were more in the rhetoric of publishers of and advertising for the Sunday school materials than in the content of the lessons themselves. Ultimately, she contends, Sunday school literature differed little by denomination or region, largely because it was written for such young audiences that doctrinal disputes were rarely evident and, furthermore, because many Sunday school authors often shamelessly borrowed or plagiarized material from other publications (112-13). Nevertheless, regional and denominational complaints increased in the closing decade of the nineteenth century.

In a well-crafted chapter on the growth of Sunday schools and Southern religious publishing institutions, McMillen suggests that the drive for denominational distinction was perhaps at its heart a question of economic interest. Surveying the contents of a wide variety of regional and denominational publications, McMillen finds few differences and concludes that "each publishing house's insistence on denominational loyalty was thus primarily an attempt to corner the market" (112). Competition for Sunday school customers may not have created sectional divisions, but calls for loyalty to section and denomination proved a powerful lever for denominational publishers. Paul Harvey, Nathan A. Hatch, and Beth Barton Schweiger, among others, have emphasized the role of print culture in the spread of American Protestantism and the growth of denominational identities; McMillen extends the argument, suggesting that the lucrative Sunday school market spurred the growth of denominational presses and actually increased pressures for regional and denominational differentiation. [6]

Initially operating under a heavy debt, denominational publishing houses had an interest in increasing the number of Sunday schools which might become loyal customers; advertisements for Sunday school materials increasingly stressed regional and denominational differences (120 and 242-43). By the early twentieth century, McMillen argues, "a profitable publishing house became critical to the success of every denomination" (243), and denominational publishing of Sunday school materials "became, to some degree, an end in itself" as it "altered the southern Sunday school and the goals of each denomination involved in this Christian enterprise" (120, see also 114). While it seems apparent that the growth of publishing houses with bills to pay would drive publishers, denominational boards, and colporteurs to foster more Sunday school customers, it is less obvious that such material conditions fundamentally altered the purpose of the Sunday school classes and lessons themselves.

The fifth chapter provides a look "Inside the Sun-

day Classroom," describing teachers and strategies of religious education. Sunday school teachers and lessons sought to shape the minds, hearts, and behavior of children: beginning with devotional stories and Bible passages to memorize, they also exposed children to lessons stressing the importance of regular church attendance, temperance, and financial support for church and missionary endeavors. Sunday school graduates were trained to be model citizens and church members who "through their faith . . . would contribute to family, church, and region" (25). Southern women took the lead in founding and sustaining many of the schools. But while women provided the majority of teachers, they only rarely wore the official title of superintendent of a whole program. McMillen suggests that women's Sunday school activism was allowed and even encouraged by male church officials because it "reinforced southerners' perception of women as Christian nurturers of the young" (56). Sunday school literature may have provided mixed messages to pupils on women –they "upheld traditional gender stereotypes but elevated females who faithfully served God" (240) – but the experiences of organizing, teaching, or managing the schools helped women "develop a sense of confidence and self-worth" (239).

Sunday school missionaries in the post-war South founded schools for both white and black southerners – in a few locations the schools were integrated, but rarely for long (165) – and native-run white and black Sunday schools had many similarities in organization and lessons. Schools for both races emphasized Biblical training and middle-class or "respectable" behavior, but McMillen explains that black-run schools were more likely to be run by female superintendents. Also, with the paucity of state public school funds for segregated schools, black Sunday schools were more likely than their white counterparts to continue basic literacy training into the early 1900s. Like post-war Southern churches in general, Sunday schools in the New South were racially segregated and, McMillen asserts, "reinforced, rather than mitigated, the region's racial divide" (244). As such, she laments, segregated Sunday schools "by their silence on human equality . . . failed to challenge white youngsters' understanding about race" (247) and were therefore "an incomplete cure" for the racial ills that really plagued the South (224ff).

Sunday schools took on new importance after Reconstruction as white Southern religious leaders urged support from their denominations for black schools and criticized continued northern involvement by offering regional and paternalistic arguments about the need to improve race relations, prevent black theological error, and white southerners 'special' understanding of and interest in the racial situation. McMillen briefly relates the story of Richard Boyd and the creation of the (black) National Baptist Convention publishing house to describe how, in many ways, black Sunday schools developed along lines similar to those of their white Southern counterparts: they accepted aid from whomever offered in the early years (from both Northern and Southern publishers and denominational missionaries), but grew more independent and assertive over their own institutions, including Sunday school literature and publishing houses, by the early twentieth century. In the era of Jim Crow and rising racial violence, black-run Sunday schools could provide a refuge and an institution clearly under the control of and working in the interest of black communities. Sunday school boosters projected that graduates would learn lessons and "absorb values that ultimately would advance the entire race" (163).

Sunday school teachers, superintendents, and promoters in the early twentieth century were active in or swept along by the same currents of Progressivism that was at the same time drawing much-needed attention on public education in the South. Actually, many Sunday and public school teachers and officials were the same people. [7] Seeking to adopt progressive methods without altering the old religious messages, twentieth-century Sunday school leaders pushed for age divisions (grades) in the classes, special classes for adults, pedagogically trained teachers, and the compilation of mountains of statistics on weekly attendance, lesson and reading selections, offerings collected, and other figures. Religious newspapers and denominational reports from this period are filled with statistical reports of pupils, teachers, and, most importantly, newly saved members of the church.

Well-run schools, many believed, would strengthen churches by systematically adding new members. As regular camp meetings and summer revivals were increasingly replaced with the steady education and training of the Sunday school, some evangelical Sunday school programs seemed surprisingly similar to the processes of catechism and confirmation practiced by their liturgical cousins. Instead of the revival pattern of individual tribulation and conversion, "[b]y the early twentieth century," McMillen explains, "groups of children from various schools all underwent conversion simultaneously" on Decision Day (13).

In several places, but especially in chapter seven on progressivism and the Sunday school, McMillen cautions

that these reforms and even Sunday school and publishing houses themselves were not endorsed by all Southern Protestants. Bristling against the modern methods of the Sunday school, the centralizing tendencies of denominational Sunday school boards or publishing houses, or the urban and middle-class themes of 'respectability' in the lessons, many Protestants – especially rural southerners of both races, McMillen asserts – "remained untouched by the institution or rejected it outright" (222). Although nineteenth century Sunday school boosters initially promoted the classes as an answer to insufficient religious education at home or even in churches, some religious and socially conservative church leaders feared that the Sunday school would "usurp domestic religious instruction and encourage mothers to neglect their duty" to educate and nurture children spiritually (230). Drawing on memoirs of some Southern mothers, McMillen suggests that the church leaders' concerns were not widely shared by parents who saw the schools as an extension of the home and an aid in child rearing.

In his recent work on progressivism and public education in the South, James Leloudis urges further study of schooling, and particularly the Progressive-era reforms in an effort to scrutinize "the institution that in modern times has assumed responsibility for much of the work once done by the family, church, and community in shaping our children's personalities and their capacity to imagine the future." [8] Early post-bellum Sunday schools often arose in the absence of public schools, and then became a safe refuge for explicit denominational teaching as public schools assumed first an ecumenical and then more secular tone. All the while, supporters and detractors alike saw the Sunday school as a powerful institution for shaping children's lives and, through them, the region's future. Though they may be based on teaching old religious ideas, Sunday schools are future-oriented and therefore a window into how Southern Protestants wanted that future to appear. McMillen's admirable study of New South Sunday schools provides a wonderful example of how the history of an institution often taken for granted can illuminate many of the social, cultural, political, and economic debates of an era.

Notes

[1] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[2] Samuel S Hill, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1984), 877. Most of the entries mention an individual figure's experiences in the Sunday School, or the establishment of a school in a particular state, but none offer a specific account of the institution itself.

[3] Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion and Reform in Galveston, 1880-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 67.

[4] Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) describes white Southern Sunday schools in a brief chapter on "Educating Confederate Christians: Sunday Schools and Denominational Colleges," 114-29 (quotation, 114). For statements of editors and denominational officials, see especially 119-21.

[5] The journal she cites was kept by James Mallory of Talladega County, Alabama (McMillen, 30 n.7): Mallory, *"Fear God and Walk Humbly": The Agricultural Journal of James Mallory, 1843-1877*, ed. Grady McWhiney, Warren O. Moore Jr, and Robert F. Pace (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

[6] Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 29-31; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1989), esp. 141-46; and Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[7] Denominational leaders and church college supporters urged white Southern Methodists and Baptists in Tennessee to take advantage of a buy-one-get-one-free arrangement: "get your teachers from Baptist colleges" for the public schools and they would do double work as good Sunday school teachers. See, for example, Harry Clark, "Get Your Teachers from Baptist Colleges," Nashville *Baptist and Reflector*, March 30, 1922, 8. Tennessee state Superintendent of Public Instruction J.W. Brister was an active leader of the Nashville Methodist Sunday school association.

[8] James Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xv.

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