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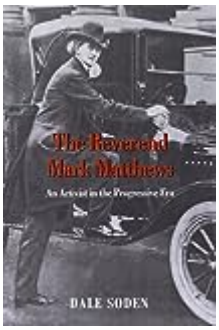

Dale E. Soden. *The Reverend Mark Matthews: An Activist in the Progressive Era.* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001. xvi + 274 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98021-8.

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Pistol-Packing Parson: Mark Matthews and Protestant Culture in the Pacific Northwest

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Once a staple of pious literature, biographies of famous clergymen are not exactly jumping off the shelves these days. But Dale Soden's story of Seattle pastor Mark Matthews suggests some good reasons for giving the genre a second look. Though the public career of this alternately cranky, idealistic, conniving, and fearless Presbyterian might not necessarily edify the faithful, it does illuminate some important aspects of American society during a complex period of spiritual transition.

Matthews is probably best known for his key role in the fundamentalist-modernist conflict within the northern Presbyterian church. As moderator of the General Assembly in 1913, he headed an investigation of Union Seminary's orthodoxy and came back with a critical report urging the denomination "Back to Fundamentals." In the mid-1920s Matthews was deeply embroiled in the effort to silence Harry Emerson Fosdick, the liberal Baptist leader who riled the General Assembly with a provocative address, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Although Soden emphasizes Matthews's more moderate, bridge-building stance as the conflict wound down to its unhappy conclusion in the late 1920s, the latter has been most frequently remembered as a confrontational champion of fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Of course, like many fundamentalist leaders, Matthews's identification with the movement was as much a matter of personal style as it was particular belief. Though never a central figure in the national cause, the Seattle pastor was clearly an adept and enthusiastic polarizer on his home turf. With his long, flowing hair and six-and-a-half-foot frame, he certainly cut a dramatic figure. An early, admiring biography in fact defended Matthews from charges that he was "effeminate," an impression created by his "meticulous formal dress," "long, curly locks," and "small, refined features." Noting that Matthews kept a pair of pearl-handed pistols in his office desk, the authors of the early biography commented brusquely that this "pistol-packing parson" was an authentic western "He-Man".[1] Soden does not gloss over Matthews's less attractive qualities, allowing that he was often egotistical, irascible, and disturbingly eager for public attention. He relates how, from time to time,

Matthews would manipulate his congregation, informing them of job offers from the pulpit and all but forcing them to come up with a competitive salary on the spot. At best paternalistic toward African-Americans, Matthews was openly opposed to woman suffrage and contemptuous of the movement to ordain women as elders in the Presbyterian church. By the end of the book, his personal piety is in fact fairly open to question: there is little evidence that Matthews ever prayed or, if he did, believed he had received a heavenly answer.

Yet Soden's portrait of Matthews amounts to far more than just an eccentric portrait of a locally famous pastor. To begin with, it adds to a relatively small but noteworthy literature of fundamentalist biography, beginning with C. Allyn Russell's engaging set of portraits, *Voices of American Fundamentalism: Seven Biographical Studies* (Westminster Press, 1976). Since then, William Vance Trollinger's biography of Minnesota Baptist William Bell Riley, Barry Hankin's study of Texas Baptist J. Frank Norris, and D. G. Hart's work on J. Gresham Machen have provided compelling, though sometimes idiosyncratic, perspectives on American fundamentalism.[2]

The composite picture is worth exploring. All four men, for example, were southerners by birth or upbringing–a list that could also include a number of other influential fundamentalists, such as John Roach Straton and J. C. Massee. This is not "new news" to scholars of fundamentalism, though a more regionally-sensitive analysis of the movement might open up some interesting lines of inquiry. In the case of many fundamentalist leaders, for instance, "Southern" did not necessarily equal "conservative." Matthews and Norris both seemed to absorb a great deal of radical social language from the influence of southern Populism in their early years. For others, such as J. C. Massee and, to a degree, Matthews himself, a southern background translated into a more moderate role in the midst of institutional controversy. Massee, a northern Baptist, operated much as Matthews did among northern Presbyterians, refusing to accept the separatist logic of his more militant colleagues, and earning a healthy share of criticism as a result. All of this invites questioning of the standard conclusion that fundamentalism was basically a Yankee phenomenon, only recently accepted by the conservative wing of the Southern Baptist Convention.

It is also true, however, that most of these men came into their own in the hardball political climate of the urban north. Norris, who simultaneously pastored churches in Fort Worth and Detroit, kept a pistol in his desk and used it to kill an opponent in 1926. Riley established his Minneapolis pulpit as a power base from which he dominated Baptist institutions across the upper midwest. Straton regularly conducted high-profile tours of New York's red light districts. Matthews probably outdid them all. In a pitched battle against Seattle politician Hiram Gill and police chief Charles Wappenstein, the Presbyterian divine employed every possible means at his disposal, including some that were devious and others that were, at least, borderline illegal. In 1910, Matthews secretly borrowed money from some of his insurance policies and hired the William Burns Agency to investigate Wappenstein and a number of his political cronies. In 1916 the Seattle pastor financed a phony gambling ring to uncover police corruption. Given these examples, and many more that might easily be added, it is a wonder that fundamentalism has been stereotyped so often as a prim rejection of American urban society: Matthews and many of his colleagues were happily up to their elbows in it. They not only "coped" with urbanization, they triumphantly mastered some of its roughest features.

What is most instructive about Soden's biography is the decision to frame Matthews's incipient fundamentalism within his more significant career as an urban political reformer and controversialist. Soden, I think rightly, depicts Matthews as a political activist who was, for a time, attracted to the fundamentalist movement–not a fundamentalist who opportunistically dabbled in politics. Like many late-Victorian evangelicals, Matthews espoused an ideal of the city as a "righteous kingdom," free of vice, poverty, and exploitation, and he regularly employed his church as a "bully pulpit" for a wide range of social causes. What perhaps set him apart from the rest was his endless, almost profligate supply of ideas for new projects. There could not have been a board of directors or planning committee in turn-of-the-century Seattle without Matthews's name on it. To name just a few examples, Matthews was president of the King County Red Cross and the local Humane Society, served on the Seattle Day Care Nursery Board and the Seattle Milk Commission, spearheaded a drive for Italian earthquake relief in 1909, and helped form the Municipal Ownership League, an organization devoted to public ownership of the city's streetcars. After World War I Matthews's social optimism markedly diminished, but clearly for most of his career, his passions were far more political than theological.

Soden's biography of Matthews therefore invites deeper questions of social and religious context. Right away, the Seattle pastor's career suggests that easy du-

alistic categories do not begin to describe the religious culture of turn-of-the-century cities. No one seemed to mind that Matthews took up a wide variety of stereotypically "liberal" and "conservative" causes. He opposed women's suffrage but championed municipal ownership of streetcars and consumer protection legislation. "If there is a hydra-headed curse in this country," he once declared, "its name is breakfast food" (p. 100). He supported the Wobblies against persecution in 1912 and was a friend and confidant of Woodrow Wilson. Though engaged in an endless variety of schemes for earthly reform, Matthews hosted a citywide revival led by J. Wilbur Chapman in 1905, testifying to his rock-bottom conviction that a personal conversion experience was the absolute requirement for salvation. There are few categories that do his career any kind of justice. Indeed, from what Soden tells us, if Matthews were alive today, likely he would find some of the more liberal Protestant denominations more to his liking than the conservative evangelical culture he helped form.

All of this suggests a story more complex than Matthews's life alone can possibly reveal. I found myself wondering a great deal about the makeup of Seattle's First Presbyterian Church, at one time the largest congregation in the country. Though Matthews was without doubt an autocratic pastor, the dynamics of First Presbyterian's congregational life must have shaped his vision somehow. I suspect that the church's membership records contain a wealth of social data that would reveal a great deal about the kinds of people who were attracted to Matthews's message. Were they, for example, as "middle-class" as Soden assumes they were? Did they vote? And how many of them were newcomers to Seattle, drawn from an ambitious, young, boarding-house population? Was First Presbyterian a "neighborhood" church, or did most of its members commute in from the suburbs? What were its neighborhood like? In short, Matthews's career raises a host of questions regarding social history, that are not necessarily difficult to research, about the role and identity of conservative Protestantism in turn-of-the-century Seattle, and other similar cities. Not every high-profile leader has such a clearly defined constituency; if anything, ministerial biographies provide a unique opportunity to compare messages against social programs, to observe membership in a cause which is growing and changing over time.

Finally, Matthews's story raises questions about the regional dynamics of American religious history. It is not too hard to figure out, for example, that being a "liberal" in Boston is not the same as being one in Grand Rapids, Michigan–nor for that matter, is being an "evangelical." Certainly the stakes for conservative Protestants were different in the relatively open market of Seattle than they were in Boston, a city with a Catholic majority as well as three centuries of religious institution-building under its belt. Not surprisingly, anti-Catholicism and fiercely competitive territorial politics played a large role in turn-of-the-century fundamentalist institution-building in Boston, and, I imagine, other east coast cities as well. But what did it mean to be alienated in Seattle? It seems entirely possible that Protestants might imagine "urban righteousness" along different lines when their city streets are not yet crowded with ancient and bitter memories. Though it is relatively moribund in the Pacific Northwest and urban Northeast today, a hundred years ago conservative white Protestantism was a broad and capacious framework that housed groups of people in disparate parts of the country: Seattle, Boston, Minneapolis, Detroit, and San Antonio. But saying that fundamentalism was a "national" movement only tells one small piece of what has to be a complex and fascinating story.

Notes

[1]. Ezra P. Giboney and Agnes M. Potter, *The Life of Mark A. Matthews* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 94-95.

[2]. William Vance Trollinger, *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Barry Hankins, *God's Rascal: J. Frank Norris and the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996); and D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

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