

A. E. DINGLE. — *The Campaign for Prohibition in Victorian England: The United Kingdom Alliance, 1872-1895*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1980. Pp. 223.

BARBARA LESLIE EPSTEIN. — *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981. Pp. ix, 188.

These two books have little in common except that in different measures they represent the growing fascination of scholars with what many people in England and the United States came for many reasons to regard as *the* most important issue facing their societies — temperance-prohibition. (The label is awkward, and Dingle moves us away from it with this useful distinction: the temperance movement encouraged an individual discipline to protect the individual and his family; the prohibition movement urged the collective discipline of the state to protect society. Thus for recent history prohibition is a profound signal.)

Dingle's goal in *The Campaign for Prohibition* is to give historians some essential understanding of the movement's political machine in Victorian England — The United Kingdom Alliance, founded in 1853 and dedicated to the conversion of social energies into the manipulations of pressure politics. There was pressure enough for a while to dominate the Liberal Party. The focus of study is almost exclusively upon the politics (the election of sympathetic M.P.'s) of attempting to have Parliament pass laws allowing the abolition of the drink business, and this focus necessarily reveals how and when the rising force of nonconformist ethics and priorities was thrusting prohibition into an entanglement with the most critical issues of empire and commonwealth.

This incoherence of issues, writes Dingle, was one cause of the Alliance's ultimate defeat. The problems of empire, especially Egypt and Ireland, were to most people simply more urgent than the problems of drunkenness in an industrial yet highly individualistic society; the proposed popular referenda on moral matters seemed entirely inconsistent with the traditions of representative government. In any case, prohibition could be conveniently delayed. Another cause was that, although the Alliance had talented leaders, its non-Anglican Protestant ethos slipped easily into the attitude expressed by their leaders that "those whom the world applauds as moderate men are ... incapable of rendering great services to mankind" (p. 227). Firmly determined to render such service, yet unwilling to compromise, Alliance crusaders lost real opportunities to bring about any of several moderate solutions, for example, a local option on the licensing of drinking houses with "just compensation" to pub owners in the event of a no-license vote. When Tories wrote in the "just compensation" clause, the Alliance men would have nothing more to do with the proposal. Indeed, Dingle writes, the fanaticism of the prohibitionists actually prevented any moderate solution.

Nevertheless, the Alliance did have the appeal and the power and the skill to capture the Liberal Party at a critical moment. The trouble was that at this moment (1892) the Liberals gained no clear majority, and the Alliance had so pledged its strength with them that it had no pressure to apply to anyone else in Parliament who might have helped the Liberals deliver a satisfying measure of prohibition. The consequent frustration of prohibitionist energies contributed to the Liberals' defeat in 1895.

This kind of severely limited inquiry produces a superior monograph. But it also denies the comparison or contrast with other national experiences that could have so easily enriched the book. What about Canada? Australia? Sweden? The United States? The most inviting comparison is with the Anti-Saloon League of

America, which, while using many of the Alliance techniques after 1900, managed to succeed where the Alliance did not. Even a casual reference to Peter Odegard's classic history of the ASL, *Pressure Politics* (1928), and to recent studies of American prohibitionists during the period when the Alliance was gaining power, would give the reader more confidence in the Alliance's significance. What Dingle does is to relate in great detail the leadership, the strategies, the finances, the administration, the campaigns of the Victorian dries. He does this with good, solid, scholarly boilerplate prose which, if bland and predictable, gets the job done neatly and without confusion.

The same cannot be said of Barbara Leslie Epstein's *The Politics of Domesticity*, for it is clear from the very beginning that this author is not winning her battle with the English language. What one would expect to be dissertation boilerplate is soggy and repetitive. And Epstein's introduction — beginning with the very first line on page 1 — is weighted with enough typos and twisted syntax to shame the least scholarly of publishers.

Be that as it may, Epstein's study is only partially concerned with temperance or prohibition and not at all with politics. What is "potentially controversial" about her book, she writes, is the argument that nineteenth-century American female culture "was shaped by conflict between men and women, conflict that was often denied by women but was rooted in the structure of their relationships with men and exacerbated by a society that devalued the dependent roles into which women were forced" (p. 8). Thus, she reasons, early nineteenth-century evangelicalism attracted the energies of many middle-class women because identifying themselves with the old-time religion was an acceptable, if indirect, rebellion against the values of the new commercial, urban, industrial capitalism — values which these women held responsible for "the destruction of the home economy and the creation of domesticity, which brought with it a new degree of dependence upon men" (p. 67).

Moreover, according to Epstein, the later home-protection crusades — women marching against the saloons, WCTU committees working not only for prohibition but for raising the age of consent, for abolishing prostitution, for achieving the franchise for women — were even more direct forms of rebellion against masculine tyranny.

This is an attractive thesis, one that must surely be raised in any discussion of the origins of modern feminism. And such discussions will surely be heated by the many weaknesses of Epstein's analysis. To begin with, if the conflict was "often denied by women", then at least a few historians will choose to assume that the women meant just what they said. Although Epstein scratches hard for evidence of evangelism-as-rebellion, she comes forth with fewer than a hundred statements from women in New England (a narrowing that quickly deflates her title) who converted in this mode. Furthermore, not all historians are comfortable with the assumption that the new nineteenth-century capitalism, which did indeed destroy the old home economy and the old religion, was any more or less sensitive to female rights than the old order had been.

For a while the proposition that the attitudes and outlooks of "temperance women" were shaped by sexual antagonisms rests on broader and more credible evidence. Certainly there was a confrontation between the new domesticity and some of the more lurid aspects of the competitive, capitalistic, exploitative masculine saloon culture. But to underline the sexual dimension of this confrontation, Epstein states that temperance grew "to a huge mass movement over a period during which per capita consumption of alcohol was steadily declining" (p. 107).

This statement defies recent scholarship. (W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* [1979]). And the approach here — the author is looking for the “politics of domesticity” which lies close to the roots of “nineteenth-century women’s culture and feminism” (p. 150) — causes her to ignore or to simplify some of the more intriguing aspects of the anti-drink movement: the striking linkage between abolitionism in the 1850s and prohibition in the 1870s; the very hard-headed economic concerns of prohibitionists like Neal Dow; the Christian socialism of Frances Willard; the smooth transition between the WCTU and the power politics of the masculine-dominated Anti-Saloon League of America. Epstein gives little consideration to the circumstance that saloon culture was not mainstream WASP culture. That is why, before women could vote, men voted to prohibit it.

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