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Book Review: Akron's "Better Half": Women's Clubs and the Humanization of the City, 1825-1925

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Akron's "Better Half": Women's Clubs and the Humanization of the City, 1825-1925.

Kathleen L. Endres. 2006. Akron: The University of Akron Press.

232 pp. \$27.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by Jennifer L. Adams¹

In her newest book, *Akron's "Better Half,"* Kathleen L. Endres explores the history of women's benevolent, social and professional organizations in and around Akron, Ohio. In Akron, as in most mid-sized industrial cities of the eastern United States, women were central to developing social services that supported the development of business and commerce, but they are largely ignored by the patriarchal histories written in celebration of men's achievements. Endres' book remedies this problem for the women of Akron whose undying work and efforts helped build and better this American city.

The book is organized chronologically into eight chapters that explore the clubs formed by Akron's women. Each club or organization examined in this book reflects the varying beliefs, attitudes and goals of the women who started and supported them, and the groups studied here represent a wide range of callings. I was pleased to find that Endres also spends considerable time writing about the individual women who joined forces to achieve the goals of their club's mission statements rather than relying merely on the common works achieved by these groups. The result is a gripping narrative, with compelling and inspiring women as the lead actors.

The early chapters of this book explore the antebellum and Civil War era clubs that emerged between about 1825 and 1865. Endres describes the earliest women's clubs in circa 1840 Akron as temperance and moral reform societies dedicated to self-proclaimed benevolent goals such as promoting abstinence and assisting the families of inebriates. Endres describes in great detail how, by 1854, the women of Akron moved beyond assisting the symptoms of poverty to fighting the causes of women's economic hardship by forming the Summit County Female Labor Association, which attempted to set prices for seamstress work around the city. Endres also spends an entire chapter on the work of Akron's women on the home-front during the Civil War, in which she elaborates upon the work done to alleviate the suffering of wounded Union soldiers and to raise money for the cause.

Throughout these early chapters, Endres peppers her historical accounts with small anecdotes that personify the clever women who worked toward their stated goals. For example, when one Civil War era organization called the Akron Soldiers Aid Society became concerned about where Akron aid was being sent, the women began a letter-writing project in which they would tuck letters into the shirts and dressing gowns shipped to hospitals. These letters, which requested soldiers' responses, were then used to track aid shipments. In this way, these letters served not only as a way to boost the morale of the wounded but also as a way to monitor the use of their donated aid

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materials. Furthermore, these women then sent the soldiers' responses to the local newspaper, as a means to promote their cause. This example is one of many that illustrate the intelligence, creativity and perseverance shared by all of the women's organizations selected for inclusion in this women's history book.

Endres dedicates an entire chapter to the women's organizations that emerged between the reconstruction period (after the civil war) and the early years of the twentieth century. Women in Akron, like in much of the rest of the United States, organized around the conjoined issues of temperance and woman's suffrage. According to Endres, many of these organizations formed around church membership, but it was the First Methodist Episcopal Church who initially began to follow the leadership of temperance workers in other nearby cities and towns. The women of Akron who belonged to this and other similar organizations lobbied and conducted saloon "visits" in which they prayed and ministered to the men who visited these saloons. However, Akron women soon learned that they could not enact social change without having access to the vote, and Endres describes the activities of suffrage activists throughout Akron and surrounding neighborhoods.

The history of twentieth century women's organizations in Akron is divided into religious and secular based groups, each with their own chapter. The religiously-based organization that receives the most elaboration by Endres is the Akron Day Nursery, also known as the Mary Day Nursery, an early day care facility that provided childcare for working parents at a small fee. This organization is representative of many of the women's organizations described here in that they were started, partially funded, maintained and promoted almost entirely by women, although these women were often from prominent families.

Secular organizations of the twentieth century in Akron, as described by Endres, were founded by women with shared interests in music, the arts, philanthropy and politics. Interestingly, Endres chooses to describe the histories of the Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in the chapter devoted to secular concerns, although these organizations are by name religiously-affiliated. None-the-less, the benevolent and political activities described are not overtly-religious, and the histories of each of these organizations in the context of Akron contributes a localized perspective on these larger national organizations.

Throughout her book, Endres attempts to describe the "diversity" of membership in these women's organizations by mentioning that they varied in age or church affiliations, but a reader cannot help but notice that all of the women included in this history have been white, and with few exceptions all have been of the upper-middle class, married to prominent businessmen, lawyers, doctors and men of government. In her final chapter, Endres makes a space for those significant number of Akron's women who were not well-to-do, white, and/or Christian. She introduces groups such as the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Women's Club (for working class women employed by Goodyear) and the Daughters of Jerusalem (for African American women), which were formally organized much like the white well-to-do groups of the period. Thus, while the inclusion of these organizations help rectify the lack of diversity represented in the groups selected for Endres' study, even these "diverse" groups follow easily recognizable patterns of organization modeled on male-dominated institutions of government and business.

Ultimately, Endres has compiled a very readable history of the women's clubs and organizations of Akron, Ohio. All of the groups included in this history are formally-organized, public organizations. And, while there is some diversity to these groups, this book really represents white, well-to-do women's history best. Even so, that is a story that has until now been untold, and therefore, this book makes a considerable contribution to re-constructing American Women's history. While some readers may lament the lack of attention to less formal or less public groups of women, which certainly existed in the form of working circles and quilting bees, I recognize that the history of these types of groups might never be retold due to the lack of any existing documentation.

In fact, one of the strengths of Endres' book is her ability to construct the story of these organizations despite a dearth of available records. The well-referenced historical documents that are interwoven in the narrative form of this book reflects Endres' ability find and identify obscure archival materials, and her lengthy endnotes will undoubtedly be useful for researchers doing similar research in Akron or in other small cities.

While this book deals with Akron women's history, I believe that its interest transcends regional boundaries. Scholars interested in nineteenth and early twentieth century women's movements would undoubtedly benefit from the local perspective provided from this text. I can also imagine this book serving as the inspiration for an advanced-undergraduate or graduate class focused on conducting women's research through primary documents in archives. I would recommend this book, then, to anyone interested in understanding women's history from a localized perspective.