

## BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas A. Robinson, *Preacher Girl: Uldine Utley and the Industry of Revival* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016). xii + 320 pp. \$49.95 cloth.

Who has heard of Uldine Utley? Almost no one, and that is Thomas Robinson's problem. Utley was one of America's most famous—and most forgotten—revivalist preachers, and the most successful “girl evangelist” of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet her story has only been half told. In *Preacher Girl*, Robinson aims to set the record straight, shining the spotlight on Utley's career, and exposing the dark side of the revival “industry.” Bringing her out of the shadows of burn-out and mental illness, Robinson succeeds in presenting Utley as a captivating figure, while uncovering the truth about her place in revivalism and her collapse under its weight.

Robinson, a Canadian historian, builds on his previous work *Out of the Mouths of Babes: Girl Evangelists in the Flapper Era* with Lanette Ruff, which explored the phenomenon of girl evangelists.<sup>1</sup> *Preacher Girl* focuses solely on Utley and her fourteen year career as a fundamentalist-Pentecostal revivalist. It is a well-told tale, engaging, and accessible. This is no dry history; the period comes alive, aided by numerous photos of Utley and her ministry. Besides extensive newspaper record research, Robinson presents new material from Utley's family, including, most significantly, Utley's private poetry. It is this material which allows him to redefine the assessment of her career.

Robinson argues that Utley has not received her due by previous historians, who claimed her career faded by the time she was eighteen, pinning her collapse on her inability to transition from child star to adult revivalist. Robinson paints Utley as the consummate revivalist who quickly mastered the “industry.” Alongside Billy Sunday and Canadian-born Aimee Semple McPherson, Utley held her position at the top of the pack. Her fame may have been helped along by her experienced team and glowing press reports, but Utley succeeded on her own merit.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas A. Robinson and Lanette D Ruff, *Out of the Mouths of Babes: Girl Evangelists in the Flapper Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Robinson concludes she was “one of the most successful revivalists, young or old, male or female, in the United States in the 1920s” (107). Furthermore, Robinson demonstrates that her career continued its trajectory well past the expiry date given by others, pointing to reconstructed crusade schedules, continued press coverage, and consistent praise. If Utley’s career experienced decline, it was that of mass evangelism in general. In fact, it was precisely the demands of her continuing *success* that contributed to her collapse.

Utley’s connection with Pentecostalism was also more substantial than others have suggested. Though she promoted herself as non-denominational, Robinson reveals a Pentecostal core, especially at the beginning of her ministry: 1) Her connection to McPherson (Utley was converted and later “called” under her ministry, and continued to be influenced by her example); 2) The “Four Square” gospel content of her sermons and writings; 3) Emphasis on faith healing; 4) Personal experience of Spirit baptism; 5) Pentecostal managers and team members. Pentecostalism was also a significant factor in propelling girl evangelists into the spotlight. It was the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit baptism that validated these young girls as preachers. “Pentecostalism transformed the understanding of the religious child ... Inspiration rather than innocence now marked the child who carried God’s message” (35). Over time, her Pentecostalism did fade (likely due to increasing fundamentalist and, later, Methodist, influences), but it remained “a key component of Utley’s sense of her purpose and her conviction of the divine power at her disposal” (117).

Though Robinson’s critique of the revivalist industry may not be new, its dark side is uniquely presented through Utley’s insightful poetry, and this is where the reader gets a backstage pass into her private world. Utley intended to publish a collection of poems titled “Kindly Remove My Halo,” which expressed the weight she felt in her ministry. Tragically, she collapsed before she could do so. Robinson points to several contributing factors, including the burden of a consistently heavy *adult* workload; the expectations of her audiences; her inability to lead a normal life; and increasing mental instability. Robinson argues that Utley’s story *had* to be forgotten because of the shame and stigma attached to mental illness.

Though Utley was undoubtedly caught up in the cogs of the “industry,” Robinson does not spend much time questioning the motives of her handlers, team, and mentors. Rather, he presents the driving force of Utley’s ministry as coming from within. There is a sense that Robinson himself may have come under Utley’s spell, but he would not be the first.

*Preacher Girl* adds valuable detail to the history of American revivalism. Beyond this, it raises several issues which are especially relevant in today’s context, namely, the dangers of ministry burn-out and the stigma of mental illness. These are made all the more forceful by the tragic nature of Utley’s life, and the final word of her haunting poetry. The halo may be gone, but in Robinson’s account, Utley still shines.

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