



ALBION FELLOWS BACON

Indiana Division, Indiana State Library

*Albion Fellows Bacon: Indiana's Municipal Housekeeper.* By Robert G. Barrows. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. Pp. xx, 229. Illustrations, notes, select bibliography, index. \$24.95.)

This first full-length biography of Albion Fellows Bacon (1865–1933) is a compelling account of one of Indiana's, and the nation's, foremost advocates of housing regulation and reform in the early twentieth century. Drawing on thorough research, Robert G. Barrows brings this relatively unknown public figure into focus and demonstrates her significance not just for the history of Evansville and Indiana but also for the history of American reform and American women.

Barrows follows Bacon's path to civic participation in Evansville and later throughout Indiana. He describes her discontent with a

life of private domesticity, her awakening to the problem of poverty and poor housing in one of Indiana's principal industrial cities, and her impressive legislative lobbying and public policy making. Bacon grew up in rural McCutchanville, Indiana, and graduated from high school in Evansville. Limited family funds prevented her from attending college, so Bacon worked as a legal secretary and a court stenographer. After marrying Hilary Edwin Bacon, an Evansville dry goods merchant, in 1888, Bacon, like most women of her class, occupied herself in the domestic sphere and devoted herself to her husband and children. But Bacon was not content and suffered in the 1890s from "nervous prostration" or neurasthenia. Barrows concludes that the disease was "a psychosomatic response to frustrated ambition" (p. 30).

Like other women in the Progressive era, Bacon found an outlet for her talents, intelligence, and ambition in social reform. She began as a friendly visitor to the poor and helped found a Visiting Nurse's Circle, the Evansville Flower Mission, the Working Girls' Association, and a local chapter of the Young Women's Christian Association. Her concern over housing conditions propelled her onto the state and national stage. Barrows details Bacon's crusade for statewide housing reform, which in 1909, 1913, and 1917 resulted in legislation regulating tenement construction and operation. Calling for the "protection of the homes of Indiana," Bacon forged an effective coalition of organizations and political leaders to campaign for laws that would make Indiana into a model of housing reform. Bacon also deployed her expertise and energy in behalf of child welfare (especially Indiana's juvenile justice system) during and after World War I and for urban planning in Evansville in the 1920s.

With this thoughtful and well-written biography, Barrows demonstrates the significance of small cities at the turn of the twentieth century as places where women pushed against the boundaries of separate spheres and became important actors in shaping public policy and practice. Barrows clearly admires Bacon, portraying her—as Bacon did herself—as an independent, nonpartisan municipal housekeeper and a moderate who occupied the high moral ground of housing reform. Barrows is not uncritical, commenting, for example, on Bacon's racism. He carefully considers how other factors accounted for her successes, and thus mitigates the tendency of biographers to claim all credit for their subjects. Barrows acknowledges that reform gave middle-class women like Bacon a sense of purpose and that it was inspired by self-interest as much as altruism. Bacon, he also observes, demonstrated "that reform efforts were not only philanthropic but also defensive" (p. 140). Barrows, however, does not sustain his analysis of Bacon and does not examine the tensions her efforts generated between social justice and social control. We do not learn how poor tenants or parents regarded Bacon's efforts, what Bacon thought of the success of the eugenics movement in Indiana,

or her response to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Nevertheless, Barrows effectively describes the process by which Bacon achieved success and fame, assesses her contributions to progressivism, situates Indiana in the national scene, and weighs Bacon's commitments to gender equality. One of a mere handful of books on Indiana women's history, Barrows's fine biography of Bacon should serve as a model and an inspiration for more work in this area.

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*Provincial Lives: Middle-class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West.* By Timothy R. Mahoney. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. x, 334. Maps, tables, illustrations, appendices, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$54.95.)

Timothy R. Mahoney offers his history of the antebellum upper Mississippi valley as an example of "regional history." In a previous book, *River Towns in the Great West* (1990), Mahoney described the transportation and economic structure of the region, and in this latest book he studies the social life based on that structure. His premise is that people lived in a regional, not a local, context.

Mahoney's study centers on three families: Elihu Washburne, a Yankee from Maine who lived in Galena, Illinois; the Langworthy brothers, Yankees from upstate New York who lived in Dubuque, Iowa; and Orville Browning, a Kentuckian who settled in Quincy, Illinois. All lived in the "near" frontier around St. Louis during the steamboat era. Chicago, however, gradually became the center of the region during the railroad era of the 1850s and 1860s. The region therefore became more northern in economic, political, and cultural orientation.

The three families embraced a "gentility," or middle-class culture, based upon evangelical Christianity (usually Presbyterianism), capitalism, and republicanism which contrasted with the male subculture of "ruffians" prevalent on the frontier. Such gentility was displayed by residence in a Greek Revival house, support of the Whig party, and social reciprocity with other genteel folk by participation in balls and dinner parties.

Washburne and Browning were both prominent lawyers. Through their experiences Mahoney studies the "social geography of law" in Illinois, including circuit riding in order to enhance revenue and political connections and the genteel culture of the law library staff at the supreme court sessions in Springfield. Lawyers also became adept at railroad law in the 1850s and, using prior extralocal connections, were movers in creating regional railroad companies.

Mahoney's study rests on meticulous archival research of localities, families, the legal profession, and railroads in his region. It will