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September 15, 2010

TAH – A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution Year Two

Book Review: ***Voice for the Mad – The Life of Dorothea Dix***
By David Gollaher

As a student and teacher of history, I've come to realize that it is the inspiration I draw from the heroic figures of history that fuels the passion I have for the subject. My optimistic nature is drawn to the stories of men and women who have dedicated their lives towards the creation of a just and more caring society. Over the past several years, as I've studied with my 8th grade students the work of reformers during the decades just prior to the Civil War, I've been drawn to the account of Dorothea Dix's efforts to help the mentally ill. Our classroom textbook devotes just over a page to her remarkable contributions and I found myself curious to know more. My curiosity increased as I noticed that the several courses I've taken in American History and the books I've read, many with a focus on women's contributions, did not mention Dorothea Dix at all. The choice to write a book review for our final assignment gave me the opportunity to delve deeply into the life and work of Dorothea Dix through the truly impressive work of David Gollaher in his book "Voice for the Mad – The Life of Dorothea Dix" for which he received the 1996 Avery O. Craven Award from the Organization of American Historians.

I discovered, in reading Gollaher's preface to his biography of Dix, that my sense of Dix being largely ignored by historians was shared by Gollaher. As an historian of science and medicine and President and CEO of the California Healthcare Institute¹, Gollaher must have been curious about this woman who not only devoted her life to help the mentally ill but also directed the nursing care of soldiers during the Civil War. He notes in his preface: "Despite her remarkable record...even in

¹ David Gollaher available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Gollaher; Internet; accessed 9/11/10

an era of feminist scholarship, Dix had floated outside the mainstream of American history. For generations, historians duly noted her among the cavalcade of antebellum reformers, but no one probed deeply into her life and work. She has remained famous, yet unknown.”(Gollaher, vii) Why she has remained famous becomes apparent as Gollaher describes and documents the recognition she received during her lifetime not only throughout the country, but throughout the world. Dix was held in high regard among the intellectual and political leaders of her day. In her effort to have national legislation passed that would provide enduring financial support to the states for the care of the insane, Dix spent a great deal of her time in the nation’s capital meeting and working with the political leaders towards her goal. Gollaher recounts how, during her stay in the home of Professor Joseph Henry, the director of the new Smithsonian Institute, “she received a constant stream of visitors. Before long she had several envelopes filled with cards of senators, congressmen, diplomats, officials of the administration, local physicians – all who came to pay their respects. Even Daniel Webster called on her, wholeheartedly agreeing that her land bill should be as ambitious as possible.” (Gollaher, 298) Dix’s travels to each state to investigate the plight of the insane and to gain state legislative support for the building of asylums to care for them brought her fame and recognition throughout the country: “Wherever she went, Dix found the unexpected growth of her reputation immensely satisfying. Touring western Pennsylvania on her way to Ohio, she boasted of being universally recognized and welcomed. ‘I see all the best minds: physicians, lawyers, judges &c.’ Letters of introduction, unused, lined the bottom of her portmanteau, for ‘not one place yet have I reached, however obscure, but I find them saying – Oh, we know you.’” (Gollaher, 199) Her fame was not limited to her countrymen; her visits to Europe for rest and recuperation brought her attention to the plight of the insane across the Atlantic. As Gollaher recounts in his chapter “The American Missionary to the Mad”, Dix’s efforts to establish government run asylums for the insane in England, Scotland, and the Channel Islands were widely

admired and supported: “By mid-1855, her constituencies included a widening circle of British reformers, including the Lunacy Commission itself. In Parliament, Lord Shaftesbury (chairman of the Parliamentary Lunacy Commission) lavished praise on her. (Gollaher, 356) At the end of her life, the widespread fame her reputation had won for her was reflected in a letter she received “from Arnori Mori, Japan’s first charge d’affaires in Washington, describing how she had inspired him to build an asylum in Kyoto” (Gollaher, 447) and in State Senator Murphy’s words to the Pennsylvania legislature shortly after her death: “That heroine of mercy, that Christian philanthropist – one of the noblest specimens of woman –‘last at the Cross and first at the grave’ – in every good work – whose name is a household word in every state; - I need scarcely mention the name of Miss D.L. Dix.” (Gollaher, 447)

This kind of widespread fame during her life would explain why her name continues to be mentioned among the group of antebellum reformers. But why, as so much light has been shed on the roles and contributions of women in American history, has the life and person of Dorothea Dix remained such a mystery? Gollaher believes there is no “simple explanation for this.” (Gollaher, viii) He suggests in his preface that Dix has failed to capture the interest of historians because she was neither a proponent of women’s rights nor an anti-slavery advocate about which “countless studies of nineteenth century women” have been made. “Since social equality between the sexes, or different races, was inconceivable to her, Dix has received a chilly reception from scholars who focus on such issues.” (Gollaher, viii) And the cause to which she did devote her life’s energy – the creation of state supported asylums to provide care and healing for those totally unable to care for themselves – has fallen into disrepute in today’s society. The failure of the state asylum to live up to Dix’s ideal of a peaceful, curative retreat “has clouded her achievement, giving her a dated air of belonging to a generation that was naively optimistic about mental disorder and social welfare.” (Gollaher, viii) And towards the end of his book, Gollaher suggests another reason why

Dix's life remained a mystery – her decision not to write an autobiography. In spite of her incredible “self-sufficiency” and her accomplishments, on behalf of the insane, in the male dominated world of politics, Dix outwardly accepted the feminine ideals of the Victorian age and wanted to be seen as exemplifying those characteristics: “Dix realized that the character traits required to wage political campaigns – toughness, persistence, determination, realism, and even a measure of cynicism – were not the qualities society was prepared to accept in a lady. So when it came to self-revelation, faced with the prospect of betraying her most cherished values, she lapsed into silence. (Gollaher, 444) Gollaher goes on to poignantly point out that “her silence ensured that she would remain an enigmatic, if familiar, figure among American reformers...Devoid of flesh and blood personality, her name would fade into an outmoded crusader; her face would be consigned to a penny postage stamp.” (Gollaher, 444)

Gollaher’s effort to shed light on the life of this “famous, yet unknown” woman is truly remarkable. More than twenty-three pages, at the back of his book, document the reams of primary and secondary sources that Gollaher studied to make a “flesh and blood” portrayal of Dix and restore her to the celebrated history of antebellum reform. Although she did not write her own story, Dix left many clues about her life through her “habit of jotting notes to friends, relatives, and acquaintances on the slightest impulse.” (Gollaher, ix) This enormous amount of private correspondence, which Dix saved, in addition to journals, diaries, and newspaper clippings gave Gollaher much of what he needed to write an incredibly detailed account of her unfortunate childhood, her driving ambition to live a purposeful life, her own battle with debilitating depression that gave her a special empathy for the mentally ill, her travel to all the states and throughout much of Europe under often difficult circumstances, over rough terrain and by herself in an age when women hardly ventured far from home, her efforts to seek out and then describe the

horrible places where the insane were mistreated and kept out of sight from society, her work supervising the nursing of the Union Civil War wounded, and her amazing interactions and accomplishments in the political world on behalf of the insane.

Although at times I did find the Gollaher's biography of Dix to be a bit too detailed in his 450 page account of her life (especially the chapter on her work for the insane in Scotland which was sometimes hard to follow due to all the various levels of government and people involved), I was glad to learn so much about Dix and have my curiosity about her assuaged. From the small amount I knew about her work to help the mentally ill, during an age when women had little voice, I had assumed she was a secure, confident woman who had enjoyed a strong, supportive upbringing. So it was quite a shock to learn from Gollaher in his chapter "The Making of an Angry Young Woman" that Dix was the child of impoverished Methodist extremists who lived in the harsh backwoods of Maine. Their harsh treatment of their daughter in their religious conviction to "break her spirit" in order to prepare her for heaven ultimately led Dix to disown her parents and claim she was an orphan. Although Dix was able to move in with her wealthy grandmother in Boston at the age of twelve, Gollaher points to her early experience of neglect and abuse as the cause of her struggle with serious depression and inability for intimacy. (Gollaher, 21)

I was also surprised and a bit dismayed to learn that Dix was annoyed by the strident efforts of the abolitionists to end slavery. She traveled extensively in the South not long before the issue of slavery tore the nation apart and yet her letters and journal note little about the issue. To the South, she was "a Northern saint...proposing that insanity, not slavery – posed the greatest moral threat to society....Human equality, particularly racial equality, had never been part of Dix's vision. The moral imperative that the black slaves should be free was lost on her." (Gollaher, 267) Gollaher writes sadly, "Of a woman so thoroughly inspired by moral conviction, one must ask why the dictates of her conscience moved her to speak out boldly on asylums and prisons, yet evaporated

when they confronted the most profound and bitterly divisive moral issue of her century.”

(Gollaher, 268)

Dix’s failure to recognize the injustice and evil of slavery places her alongside many others of her time and yet her single-minded effort to work on behalf of the voiceless insane shows her to be a woman ahead of her time. And so she deserves our admiration and attention. The ultimate failure of the state asylums to properly care for the insane is not Dix’s failure. As Gollaher closes his biography of Dix, he challenges the reader to consider why the asylum has failed, why the “institutions that Dix built, which are for the most part still standing...have long since come to be viewed as part of the problem of what to do with the mad, not the solution.” Gollaher writes that Dix ‘likened the insane to a kind of awful moral tax that God assessed on society. She argued that how society paid this tax was the most valid test of its principles.’” (Gollaher, 448) Unfortunately, “her institutions failed not because they were so powerful but because they were so weak.”

(Gollaher, 449) Although Dix had been successful in getting state legislatures to build asylums, she had failed to convince Congress to pass a bill designed to provide financial support for the state asylums through the sale of national land. So as Gollaher points out “the asylum movement never received enough funding, and enough intelligent management, to settle the question of whether or not institutional care could be made to work under modern conditions.” (Gollaher, 449) And so sadly, we are left, after the decarceration of Dix’s asylums, back where she first found many of the insane – filling our jails and roaming the streets, hopeless and homeless.

Bibliography

Gollaher, David. Voice for the Mad – The Life of Dorothea Dix. New York: The Free Press, 1995.