

BOOK REVIEWS

John Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

John Frick's *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* is a solid and original study of a subject – nineteenth-century temperance drama – that was in desperate need of such treatment. As Frick points out in his introduction, temperance drama has been the redheaded stepchild of literary criticism. Drama as a whole tends to be neglected by literary scholars; those who do study drama turn up their noses at melodrama, and even the small cadre of scholars of melodrama steer away from reformist dramas like temperance plays (1-11). At the same time, historians of temperance have not made sustained analyses of the enormous volume of creative literature produced by the movement. Yet, both amateur and professional temperance dramas were enormously popular in the nineteenth century, and influential both within and beyond the temperance movement itself.

Frick's book is not long, and does not intend to be comprehensive, but it is ambitious in its scope, treating the evolution of temperance drama from the 1825-1826 debut of *The Forgers* through the progressive era. Frick begins with an able chapter on the nineteenth-century temperance movement. While this is intended for non-specialists, Frick really has done his homework, and this reviewer found it quite useful and informative. Frick is not trained as a historian, however, and his book is more driven by textual analysis than by engagement

with a broader social context. This comes through in a very few misreadings of nineteenth-century culture. He tends to gravitate towards cultural studies rather than historical texts, and towards some of the more spectacular propositions in the literature. On occasion he pushes them farther than is legitimate. For instance, he appropriates the central argument of Karen Sanchez- Eppler's "Temperance in the Bed of a Child," but presents it without much of her contextualization and qualification, ending up with bald assertions like, between 1790 and 1820 "intemperance was becoming recognized as the principal contributing factor in ... incest involving a child and her drunken father"(25). One can almost visualize the early-national incest awareness educators fanning the countryside. But aside from this and two or three other minor examples, Frick is quite solid on history.

Frick next considers the growth of antebellum temperance drama in the context of the social anxiety and displacement brought about by urbanization. Following Reynolds' lead, he considers the relationships of temperance drama to the massively popular city mysteries plays of the period. Antebellum temperance plays, Frick argues, addressed many of the concerns of the new and newly urbanizing population: the education of young people, the fear of slavery, the perceived crisis of the family. At the same time, during these heady days of faith in moral suasion, the plays were fundamentally assimilationist in character; antebellum drunkards were objects of sympathy, usually redeemed by the final curtain.

Frick's valuable third chapter deals with the British prototypes of American temperance drama. The heart of the chapter is a thorough treatment of the works of Douglas Jerrold, whose 1841 *Fifteen Years of a Drunkards Life* may significantly have influenced *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, and of the many theatrical adaptations of George Cruickshank's serial illustrations, *The Bottle* (1847) and *The Drunkard's Children* (1848).

Frick endorses Odell's assertion that *Fifteen Years* was the true prototype of the nineteenth-century temperance play, pointing

out that it contained most of the key elements of the genre: reliance upon visual representations of the effects of drink through costume and makeup, the depiction of alcoholism as a form of slavery, the portrayal of the drunkard as a good but weak man, the deleterious impact of intemperance upon women and the inclusion of the stock characters of the villain and the temperance spokesman (81). This evidence of the early emergence of the conventional drunkard tale in Britain is an important corrective to Americanists who have considered the genre's domestic roots, but it would be even more powerful if it were placed in the context of early to mid nineteenth-century temperance discourse more generally, including novels, plays, and experience speeches.

Next, Frick gives a sustained analysis to temperance drama in what he considers to be its heyday, the antebellum period. Perhaps his most interesting insight here is teasing out textual evidence of the decline of confidence in moral suasion, as female influence fails time and again to reclaim drunken family members. He also gives a good deal of much-needed biographical treatment to T.S. Arthur. In particular, his argument that Arthur's conversion to coercive reform arose from his adherence to Swedenborgianism is worth a good read (131).

Frick sees a major shift in the location of temperance production after the war. Temperance dramas never again made it big on Broadway, but rather became staples of marginal traveling troupes, and, even more, of amateur performers like WCTU members, schoolchildren, and Odd Fellows. Here Frick makes a fascinating argument, and one that I wish he had elaborated more fully. He notes that in a great age of consolidation, trusts, and the decline of island communities, "Unlike other forms of theatre, temperance drama, both in its production and its reception, defied the national trend toward centralization" (148). Frick tantalizingly suggests that the rustication of temperance drama was due to internal ideological factors, and his exploration of the prominence of urban corruption themes in temperance drama supports this

argument. An equally convincing way to understand this change, however, would be as a product of two external factors: the legitimate theatre's loss of interest in it (which is an interesting question in its own right), paired with improvements in things like printing and the postal system that led to a proliferation of cheaply produced mail-order scripts of all varieties around the country. There was not necessarily some sort of economy of temperance dramas such that if squeezed off of Broadway they would pop up somewhere else. I would like to see evidence that temperance drama's urban decline and small-town proliferation was more pronounced than that of minstrel shows, for instance, in the same years. Even given that sort of evidence, it seems a mistake to read the change from urban, professional production to small-town amateur productions as unambiguously decentralizing. After all, the scripts may have been written largely by Midwestern women, and published far from New York City, but most of them were solicited, owned, printed, and distributed by a small group of large, nationally-marketed printing houses that clearly imposed a high level of standardization on their authors.

Perhaps even more valuable than the substance of his arguments is the fact that Frick brings something to temperance and alcohol studies that has too frequently been lacking: theory. Frick brings the critical insights of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and others to bear on the temperance movement in ways that most recent scholars of the movement have not frequently done. Because he is coming out of a different scholarly context, Frick has many interesting ideas, some only suggested in passing, each of which could launch its own dissertation. It is a fine book, and one that should be read by all scholars of the temperance movement.

ELAINE FRANTZ PARSONS, DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
parsonse@duq.edu