

# The Women's Christian Temperance Union: Demanding Rights and Oppressing Immigrants

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### Recommended Citation

Walsh, Julia () "The Women's Christian Temperance Union: Demanding Rights and Oppressing Immigrants," *The Histories*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories/vol9/iss2/6](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol9/iss2/6)

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The Women's Christian Temperance Union:  
Demanding Rights and Oppressing Immigrants  
 By Julia Walsh '12



Alcohol. This lone word, one of many words in the English language, can stir up multiple emotions, stories, and some (maybe hazy) memories. The culture of drinking in America differs greatly from the drinking culture in many of our European counterparts. While the Italians serve wine with lunch and dinner, the Germans take pride in their *biertgartens* and *Oktoberfest*. The Irish are also known for their love of the pint or a wee bit of whisky, while the French enjoy alcohol to complement their fine cuisine. In America, those under twenty-one years of age are forbidden to consume alcohol or even be in the presence of it. In America, you can serve your country in the military at age eighteen, but you cannot enter a bar when you return home. In America, we had the temperance movement and prohibition in which both the consumption and sale of alcoholic beverages were illegal.

In a nation of immigrants, the temperance movement sought to ban a crucial aspect of foreign cultures—alcohol—during the first Gilded Age. This era in American history saw a rise in immigration as well as female participation in social issues on a larger scale. The latter grew in discussing and changing public policy, particularly through the Women's Christian Temperance Union; these middle-class Protestant ladies associated alcohol with abusive husbands, broken families, and heathen immigrants. Thus, their desire to promote temperance stemmed from the perceived need to uphold the moral fiber of the nation beyond their role in the cult of domesticity. But what also began to rise in America during the Gilded Age were class distinctions. A *nouveau riche* replaced old money. A middle class began to bloom. And a lower class of immigrants crammed into cities to find work. Therefore, the temperance movement also stemmed from a desire of the middle and upper class to tame and control the lower immigrant class; they were able to use nativist fears and stereotypes to popularize temperance and prohibition. The ramifications of the WCTU's actions still permeate our country today.

Abstaining from alcohol and the idea of temperance were not new phenomena to the Gilded Age. In colonial days, drinking was looked at with a completely different mentality. Alcohol was safer to drink than water because water could often be contaminated; doctors prescribed it as medicine for all sorts of ailments or as to pain relievers and relaxants.<sup>1</sup> Don Cahalan, a late professor for the University of California at

<sup>1</sup> Don Cahalan. *Understanding America's Drinking Problem: How to Combat the Hazards of Alcohol*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987), 24.

Berkeley's School of Public Health, also acknowledged that Puritans were not supporters of prohibition as early settlers because they themselves enjoyed drinking. As soon as they landed, they started "making beer and hard cider and wine from native fruits and berries."<sup>2</sup> However, as the 1700s progressed, Cahalan noted that some settlers began to advocate prohibition of distilling.<sup>3</sup> Regulation of taverns even began to occur through taxes on alcoholic beverages as early as the 1600s.

Thus this is the beginning of America's complicated relationship with drinking. Once the colonists became their own separate nation, talks of temperance continued in the pre-Gilded Age, antebellum period. In 1833, the American Temperance Society, stated alcohol was not "needful, or useful." Rather, it caused bodily harm and spiritual corruption.<sup>4</sup> At this time, the moral implications surrounding alcoholic consumption began to provide the primary drive for temperance and prohibition.

Pre-Gilded Age immigrants, especially the Irish and Germans, caused the average American (the white Protestant) to take a more impassioned stance on alcoholic abstinence which Cahalan notes began around 1850.<sup>5</sup> The Irish and Germans were particularly fond of their drink, and anti-Catholic nativists perceived these urban wage laborers as a major threat to the country's moral fiber. Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* presents the stereotype of the Irish as rowdy, proud, violent drunkards. According to author Holly Berkley Fletcher, citizens saw the influx of immigrants to be invaders in their native land.<sup>6</sup> The 1840s saw increased "efforts to achieve legislation governing the sale and use of alcohol,"<sup>7</sup> states sociologist Joseph R. Gusfield. During this time, the Irish were pouring into the country to escape the destruction of the great Potato Famine; the Germans entered in order to find political and economic stability.<sup>8</sup> Both groups largely diversified the urban population, and both cultures placed central importance on tavern life.<sup>9</sup> Americans did not understand nor attempt to understand the Irish and German cultures of alcoholic consumption and thus sought to eradicate it simply because it was "un-American."

Religious ideas also contributed a great deal to the temperance movement of the 1820s and 30s and the later Gilded Age. Gusfield observes that this time period ushered in the "definition of the drinker as an object of social shame."<sup>10</sup> He writes, "Awareness in the growth in temperance organization in this period was sparked by the conversion of drinking men to abstinence under the stimulus of evangelical revivalism."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many early leaders of the movement were Protestants who converted other Protestants. For example, the American Temperance society in 1826 saw its main leaders hail from

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 26

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 27

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 28

<sup>6</sup> Holly Berkley Fletcher. *Gender and the American Temperance Movement of the Nineteenth Century*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 68-9.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, "Moral Passage: The Symbolic Process in Public Designation of Deviance," in *The Collective Definition of Deviance*, ed. F. James Davis and Richard Stivers. (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Ushistory.org, "Irish and German Immigration," *US History Online Textbook*, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/25f.asp>.

<sup>9</sup> Gusfield, "Moral Passage..." 94.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Presbyterian ministry.<sup>12</sup> Ministers were able to use guilt and the promise of the salvation in order to curb alcohol consumption within their flock.<sup>13</sup>

Another crucial period in American history overlapped with the desire for a dry nation—the American Civil War. According to Fletcher, “[c]onsumption of lager beer in 1865 was double what it had been fifteen years before and these numbers continued to climb through the end of the century...”<sup>14</sup> She also argues that post-Civil War, temperance became “an outwardly focus for American Society”<sup>15</sup> which united once divided Americans.

Post-Civil War, immigration continued and included many Eastern Europeans in addition to the Irish and Germans. Many traditional Americans viewed them as a threat to their way of life. (However, these Americans typically failed to realize their own history of immigration which included depriving Native Americans of their land and rights.) They did not speak English. They were dirty and poor. And they drank a lot. According to Richard Stivers in the introduction of *The Collective Definition of Deviance*, “[T]he American Temperance Movement... was less interested in preventing drinking than in asserting the cultural superiority of a native, Protestant, rural, non-drinking life-style over the immigrant, Catholic, drinking life-style.”<sup>16</sup> This cultural clash made another divide in an already divided nation. According to Fletcher, the immigrant fear existed in the antebellum period but became all the more prevalent after the war in the Gilded Age “with the political organization of the liquor industry and political exploitation of immigrant communities particularly in cities.”<sup>17</sup> Upton Sinclair exemplified this idea in his work *The Jungle* (1905). The protagonist, Jurgis, must buy a drink in order to get a free meal because his survival depends on it.

The question now lies in what role women played in this debate. Eventually, they began to exert a larger role in the movement and expand their influence beyond the cult of domesticity, because alcohol use and abuse by men affected the lives of countless mothers and children. The National Women’s Christian Temperance Union, founded in 1874, became “the first women’s mass movement in history”<sup>18</sup> and “the modern world’s first large-scale, nonviolent protest movement” states Edward Behr.<sup>19</sup> Comprised mostly of middle-class women who “wanted to better the working class economically, socially, and morally—even against its wish and inclination,”<sup>20</sup> the temperance movement allowed them to vocalize their opinions and springboard their demand for more rights in American politics without consideration for their new countrymen.

These women felt passionate in their desire to influence society, partly because of their religious devotion. While men often considered women to be the weaker and more

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, “Status Conflict and the Changing Ideologies of the American Temperance Movement,” in *The Collective Definition of Deviance*, ed. F. James Davis and Richard Stivers. (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 222.

<sup>13</sup> Gusfield, “Moral Passage...”, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Fletcher, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Stivers, introduction to “Lived Morality and Conceptions of Deviance,” in *The Collective Definition of Deviance*, ed. F. James Davis and Richard Stivers. (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Fletcher, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Behr, *Prohibition: Thirteen Years that Changed America*. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996), 35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 46.

emotional of the two sexes, women viewed themselves as “innately more pious and pure than men.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, they saw the temperance movement as a moral obligation.

The WCTU also provided a forum for similar minded women to make a difference beyond their households by protesting, lobbying, and publicly displaying support for alcoholic abstinence, especially for immigrants. With the rise of immigration during the Gilded Age, the WCTU targeted them in hopes of improving their economic situation. To them, the reason immigrants could not improve their social standing was because they were too fond of the drink, a naïve assumption that did not take into account nativist discrimination; WCTU literature reflects this assumption as Gusfield notes:

Irish and German immigrants were often depicted in the process of reformation. Often it was the son or daughter of the immigrant who affected the process of reformation through his or her experiences with the WCTU. This type of story again presents the idea that the acceptance of temperance is a mode of assimilation into middle-class life.<sup>22</sup>

This phenomenon is not specific to the women’s Christian temperance movement, however. Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* also stereotypes the Irish and demonstrates the inability for Maggie to break the cycle of drunkenness and poverty that surrounds her; in *The Jungle*, Jurgis is saved by socialism and abstinence from alcohol. With a strong anti-immigrant sentiment in the nation, the women of the movement saw an ever present need to “Americanize” and “Christianize” these foreigners.<sup>23</sup> (Ironically, these immigrants were often Catholic or some other form of Protestant; the WCTU’s need to convert them demonstrates a sense of self-assuming American superiority, not unlike the attitude of the Gilded Age *nouveau riche*.) In addition, the WCTU worked to improve other facets of immigrant life besides temperance; the group also supported: labor reforms, child labor laws, and monetary contributions for a center to aid incoming immigrants at Ellis Island.<sup>24</sup> However, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union did have “an aggressive nativist strain...during the 1880s and 1890s.”<sup>25</sup> By participating in these acts, the WCTU thought they could change the immigrants’ drunken ways. But the fact that they did not form any strong connections with nativist centered groups testifies to the fact that the WCTU was not outwardly discriminatory toward immigrants<sup>26</sup>; they were more interested on imposing their way—the “right way”—on those lowest in society.

According to Ray Hutchinson, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the WCTU and

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<sup>21</sup> Rumi Yasutake. “Transnational Women’s Activism: The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in Japan and the United States,” in *Women and Twentieth Century Protestantism*, ed. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Brerton. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 93

<sup>22</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield. “Social Structure and Moral Reform: A Study of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.” *Sociology, The Progress of a Decade: A Collection of Articles*. Ed. Seymour Martin Lipset and Neil J. Smelser. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961), 596.

<sup>23</sup> “Status Conflict...” 230.

<sup>24</sup> “Social Structure...” 594-5.

<sup>25</sup> “Status Conflict...” 230.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

“other social movements concerned with the alcohol problem in the United States”<sup>27</sup> shift their focus to “prohibition rather than personal abstinence as a solution to the alcohol problem.”<sup>28</sup> Prohibition was not the only issue pushed to the forefront. By asserting themselves in the immigrant experience and pushing temperance/prohibition to the forefront of American politics, the WCTU also began to promote women’s rights. Frances Willard, the second president of the union, can be credited with fusing the fight for women’s rights, her first passion, with the fight for temperance. Before helping found the WCTU in 1874, Willard served as Dean of Women at Northwestern University. In 1879, five years after its creation, Willard at age 40, became the President of the WCTU. During her tenure in office, she accomplished a great deal for the cause, especially because of her “do-everything” policy. This philosophy became the umbrella for other women’s related movements within this “powerful political force.”<sup>29</sup> As President, she “encouraged other women to speak publicly for religious and political causes and in so doing push the limits of gender restrictions.”<sup>30</sup> Clearly, Willard’s agenda would ultimately seek to include women’s rights; after all, this was a group for women run by women<sup>31</sup> in a society dominated by men. In Willard’s eyes, they more than proved their capability to handle other political matters, such as voting. They were the “new women”<sup>32</sup> of America. Though they valued their roles as mothers and wives,<sup>33</sup> the WCTU became enamored with the ideals of the Gilded Age (which Henry Adams opposed) and liberty. Ironically, the WCTU, in demanding their rights for suffrage, suppressed the liberty of other individuals, especially immigrants, to drink what they want.

Dynamic and charismatic, Willard sought to achieve both her goals—and not just in America. In 1883, she created the World’s Women Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU). Chapters were created in countries ranging from England to Japan. The notion of a group of women worldwide united for a common cause also demonstrated growing American influence in the world. The WWCTU was the first international women’s organization; the existence of such a group, founded by Americans, seems to have been another way for them to assert a growing sense of self-importance and dominance.

But European cultures have always viewed alcohol consumption much differently than us. Europe was also not built on the backs of immigrants. Yet, the WCTU imposed its American Protestant message on the world without respecting the nature of alcohol in the more established realm of European culture and society which was also the culture of American immigrants. According to Ian Tyrell, the WWCTU met some backlash especially since the European middle class did not perceive the

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<sup>27</sup> Ray Hutchinson. “Capitalism, Religion, and Reform: The Social History of Temperance in Harvey, Illinois,” in *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History*, ed. Susanna Barrows and Robin Room. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 207.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Coble. “The Role of Young People’s Societies in the Training of Christian Womanhood (and Manhood), 1880-1910,” in *Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism*, ed. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Brereton. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 77.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 77-8.

<sup>31</sup> Yasutake, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Mattingly, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

consumption of alcoholic beverages as a problem or a sin.<sup>34</sup>

At home, several commentators, such as Fletcher, claim that Willard worked to make the WCTU “more racially inclusive and made greater efforts to reach out to African Americans and to immigrants. The WCTU actively tried to include immigrants in their work and to counter stereotypes about them.”<sup>35</sup> Ruth Bordin states,

The WCTU was not only a mass movement that made substantial contributions to both the goals and the accomplishments of the nineteenth-century women’s movement; it also widely embraced diverse ethnic, sectional, and racial groups. Although small in numbers, the mere presence of blacks, native Americans, and immigrants, and Southerners too (who were numerically more important), contributed to the Union’s claims to represent American womanhood.<sup>36</sup>

However, others argue there was not complete inclusion. African American women had their own WCTU divisions, separate from white ones. At one point, Ida B. Wells accused Willard of changing the WCTU’s anti-lynching stance in order to appease Southern supporters.<sup>37</sup> In terms of immigrants, the WCTU still viewed immigrant women as a means of saving immigrant men from the dangers of the drink.<sup>38</sup> The “reformed” men could also be manipulated at the polls to legalize the cause.<sup>39</sup> (We saw voter manipulation with Jurgis.) But as nativism grew in the 1890, Bordin also notes that in Willard’s “last address to a national convention she asked that Congress ‘enact a stringent immigration law prohibiting the influx into our land of more of the scum of the Old World, until we have educated those who are here.’”<sup>40</sup> That statement demonstrates that helping immigrants adjust to America was not the reason women promoted temperance, but rather fear of them and condescension towards them. They were “scum” from the “Old World,” and the Gilded Age in America was creating its own world. Representing universal womanhood, the WCTU really represented the womanhood of the white American Protestant.

In terms of enacting drastic social change for the immigrant classes, the WCTU experienced great success, especially because of “the tremendous increase in immigration after 1890.”<sup>41</sup> Many of them were Catholic and Jewish, who did not “patronize the WCTU,”<sup>42</sup> and the further growth of cities pushed the temperance issue to the forefront of politics.<sup>43</sup> The American middle- and upper-classes saw them as an even greater threat. In 1883, the nation’s states began to enact temperance laws requiring schools to teach

<sup>34</sup> Ian Tyrell. *Woman’s World. Woman’s Empire*. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: the University of North Carolina Press, 1991.), 69.

<sup>35</sup> Fletcher, 120.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Bordin. *Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 159.

<sup>37</sup> Ian Tyrell. “Women and Temperance in International Perspective: The World’s WCTU, 1880s-1920s,” in *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History*. Ed. Susanna Barrows and Robin Room. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 227.

<sup>38</sup> *Women and Temperance*, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Gusfield. “Status Conflict...,” 233.

<sup>40</sup> *Women and Temperance*, 87.

<sup>41</sup> Gusfield, “Status Conflict...,” 232.

<sup>42</sup> Tyrell. “Woman’s Empire...,” 65.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

“harmful physical effects of alcohol, narcotics, and stimulants.”<sup>44</sup> They also mandated that teachers pass “an examination on the effects of alcohol and narcotics,”<sup>45</sup> expanding their cult of domesticity to incorporate schools. While they considered this quite an accomplishment, teachers viewed the laws as an insult. They did not think the WCTU should be dictating what they should teach.<sup>46</sup> Again, the WCTU imposed their views on another group. According to Bordin:

In 1907 the WCTU ceased endorsing textbooks and concentrated thenceforth on prize contests, the donation of reference books to school libraries, and proselytizing among teachers. But its campaign for coercive temperance education had been almost universally successful in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was to continue as a major force in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>...certainly, compulsory temperance education was one of the more lasting effects of WCTU political activity in the nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup>

Behr also notes that the teaching practices of temperance were “demonstrations of little scientific value but of startling impact.”<sup>48</sup> The WCTU now wanted to send its message, regardless of scientific accuracy, to the youth of the nation. Many of these laws still exist today.

The largest “achievement” of the WCTU culminated in 1919 with the ratification of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The Amendment, which banned the sale and consumption of alcohol, went into effect in 1920. According to Gusfield, the Amendment’s passing came “at the height of immigrant cultures and at the height of immigrant influx into the United States.”<sup>49</sup> It was successful only in that it passed. People found ways around the law, such as making their own alcohol, operating “speakeasies,” or turning to organized crime. It did not eradicate the problem; in some ways it worsened it. Because of its lack of success, the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment was repealed in 1933.

Now in the midst of what some have dubbed the second Gilded Age, the role of the WCTU, which actually still exists, may be seen as a trite joke in American society. Immigrants are no longer the focus group for temperance reform nor is women’s suffrage an issue (though they still advocate for women). The group has no interest, Gusfield says, in the “humanitarian reform of the underprivileged. Instead it is an indignation against the moderate drinker...The middle-class drinking habits are not only in conflict with WCTU norms; they are defections from past standards.”<sup>50</sup> The class distinctions between drinkers and non-drinkers no longer exist. One example of this attack on the moderate drinker is the union’s opposition to the Amethyst Initiative which would lower the drinking age from 21 to 18.<sup>51</sup> They see this as a terrible danger to the youth our nation; however, the youth (particularly those in college under 21) may feel differently.

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<sup>44</sup> *Women and Temperance*, 135-6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>48</sup> Behr, 39.

<sup>49</sup> “Social Structure...,” 599.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Women’s Christian Temperance Union, “WCTU Opposes Amethyst Initiative,” WCTU, <http://www.wctu.org/amethyst.html>

Times are vastly different today for women and for immigrants than they were for those of the Gilded Age. Women have suffrage. They have college degrees. They are more than just housewives; sometimes they are the breadwinner. Immigrants are no longer coming in large droves from Europe; the biggest influx of immigrants is from south of the border. Though they are being targeted by nativists for other things, like illegally entering the country, smuggling narcotics, and not speaking English, alcohol consumption is not one of them. There are not as many slums now either. And workers have rights.

The legacy of the WCTU is very much embedded in our culture and seems outdated; modern society has a much different outlook on alcohol. It permeates advertisements, TV shows, college campuses, and high school woods. Class distinctions do not separate who consumes alcohol or how much they drink. The WCTU has only complicated matters, especially for college students under the legal drinking age of 21. Regardless of the American college students' feelings, international students under our legal drinking age are no longer entitled to a right they have at home. Because of the WCTU's views and activism in the first Gilded Age, alcohol has become taboo and rigorously suppressed in some households in the second. This mindset sometimes negatively impacts children because once they "fly the nest," they do not always know their alcohol limits or how to drink responsibly, often making several regrettable decisions as a result. Again, the WCTU continues to impose what they consider a desirable lifestyle, not what is practical in today's society. Less powerful groups disagree, but they are not likely to change the law because it is not a major issue in American politics. (Immigration still is, however.)

And so, underage drinkers will still continue to find alcohol any way they can. College kids will still buy fake IDs to get into bars. People will still abuse the drink. And Europe will still be a place where young adults can be treated like adults and consume alcohol as such.

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