

The Literature on Carry A. Nation

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I hereby pledge on my word of honor that I have neither given nor received help on this work.

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Abstract

Carry Amelia Nation embodied the most radical aspects of the temperance movement and created her own unique form of Christianity to guide her through her journey and inspire her followers. This paper analyzes the monographs that have been published on Carry Nation and explores how writers have created the image of Nation that exists today. Nation has been largely overlooked in the historiography on temperance and prohibition in favor of Francis Willard, the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and a far more moderate anti-liquor activist. What has been written on Nation has long provided a biased male understanding of her, and this understanding has only recently begun to shift with Fran Grace's 2001 monograph, *Carry A. Nation: Retelling the Life*. Grace's monograph is also the first to utilize primary documents, such as letters and diaries, that were kept by Nation's descendants. This use of primary sources is partly what contributed to the shift in the historiography of Nation as there was no longer a reliance on the biased newspaper and magazine articles written about Nation during her lifetime.

The Progressive Era temperance movement was one of the most contentious fights for social change that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States. No one represented the radical side of this movement better than Carry Amelia Nation, an intensely religious prohibitionist who was unwilling to compromise on her moral convictions against drinking. Nation was born in Kentucky in 1846 to an alcoholic father and a mentally ill mother. She was raised primarily by the slave women her family owned. This upbringing gave her a love of slave religion which she carried with her throughout her entire life and combined with characteristics of Baptism, Evangelism, and Roman Catholicism. Nation experienced two failed marriages, one to an impoverished alcoholic and one to a man who divorced her because of her radical activism. She joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union in her forties and quickly became famous—infamous, depending on who is describing her—for her unorthodox behavior. “With a Bible in one hand and a hatchet in the other,” Nation embarked on tours of destruction across the Midwest as she—quite literally—tore apart drinking establishments while preaching impassioned sermons on the evils of alcohol.¹ Unphased by arrests, beatings, and death threats, Nation rejoiced in her work, even longing to become a martyr to the cause of prohibition.

Though there is a sizable amount of literature on Francis Willard, the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Carry Nation has been generally overlooked in the historiography of temperance and prohibition.² This is largely due to a consensus among historians that Nation's radicalism caused her to be so hated and dismissed that she did not have

¹ Fran Grace, *Carry A. Nation: Retelling the Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 281.

² Like Nation, Willard wrote an autobiography detailing her life and what drove her to the temperance movement. Unlike Nation, Willard's autobiography was followed by a decent number of monographs dedicated to her and has received far more attention from social historians and women scholars. See Anna A. Gordon's *The Beautiful Life of Francis Willard: A Memorial Volume* (1898), Lydia Trowbridge's *Francis Willard of Evanston* (1938), Mary Earhart Dillon's *Francis Willard: From Prayers to Politics* (1944), Ruth Birgitta Anderson Bordin's *Francis Willard: A Biography* (1986), and Richard W. Leeman's *“Do Everything” Reform: The Oratory of Francis E. Willard* (1992).

a notable impact on the eventual enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment and that Willard was far more central to the implementation of legal prohibition. The small amount of literature that does exist on Nation tends to align with the same argument that was presented about her during her lifetime: that she was a deeply troubled woman, plagued by past traumas and driven to madness by a relentless need to impose her religious beliefs on the world. Though some work has recently been done to reverse this narrative, the rigid and often negative image of Nation has been so deeply ingrained into the nation's memory that inaccurate portrayals of her persist to this day and continue to be accepted as fact.

The first monograph published on Carry Nation, Herbert Asbury's 1929 *Carry Nation*, established an understanding of Nation that characterizes her as a mentally unstable woman whose actions were a detriment to society rather than a solution to its problems. The bulk of Asbury's sources are newspaper and journal articles, such as those from *The Outlook* and *The New York World*, and he generally believes that what was written about Nation in those newspapers is accurate. Subsequently, Asbury's arguments in his biography reflect the negative approaches that journalists took when writing about the prohibitionist. As a journalist who mainly focused on crime, Asbury felt frustration at the enactment of prohibition as he believed that it would only lead to more criminal activity in the United States as people sought to circumvent the law, creating "the present welter of speakeasies, wholesale corruption and murderous bootleggers."³ Asbury's writing is somewhat sympathetic toward Nation's desire to solve the United States' alcohol problem.⁴ He describes her as a strong-willed, committed

³ Herbert Asbury, *Carry Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), xxii. "Present" is in regard to the 1920's era in which Asbury wrote his biography.

⁴ Most among the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century middle class (which produced the majority of social reformers) agreed that alcoholism was a threat to Progressive Era ideals. Women in particular were concerned that alcohol was preventing men from attending to and providing for their families. Additionally, the anti-liquor

woman, yet at the same time, Asbury takes away much of Nation's agency, depicting her as little more than the result of bad genes, a life of tragedy, and a misguided religiosity. He is insistent that "there were sound reasons for Carry Nations [*sic*] peculiarities, the most dominating of which was the well-defined strain of madness" that was present in her family.⁵

Fran Grace, a professor of religion at the University of Redlands, disagrees. In her 2001 biography of Nation, *Carry A. Nation: Retelling the Life*, she largely discredits Asbury as a man biased by the early twentieth-century prejudice against assertive women and argues that this bias did not allow him to write an objective history of Carry Nation. Grace claims that Asbury's monograph is "the only serious biography ever published about [Carry Nation]" and that the result of his bias in the biography was that the rumors about Nation included in his monograph—rumors which were widely circulated by Progressive-Era journalists that covered Nation's destructive trail—came to be taken as historical fact.⁶ It was especially common in Asbury's day to label assertive and/or unconventional women as mentally ill, and Nation's extreme refusal to conform to societal standards for women basically ensured that one of the first terms people used to describe her was "crazy." Grace, however, argues that Nation's methods were driven by her religious convictions and frustration at the societal devastation caused by alcoholism, not by insanity as Asbury argues.

In spite of his criticisms of Nation, Asbury displays a sort of grudging admiration for his subject, being the first writer to credit her with the Eighteenth Amendment. He asserts that Nation "transformed [the temperance movement] from an apologetic weakling into a militant

movement was fueled by discrimination against immigrants, among whom alcohol was often a central part of social life.

⁵Asbury, xx.

⁶ Grace, 1.

giant of overwhelming power” and that, without her, prohibition would likely never have become written into law.⁷ While Asbury acknowledges that Nation’s profound influence on society is impressive given that she was a woman, he does not view that influence as a positive one, writing that Nation’s role in the legal success of prohibition was the cause of the rampant corruption and crime in the decade following the Eighteenth Amendment being ratified in 1919. Because Asbury’s work remains an influential part of the literature on Nation, his views were integral to establishing an inaccurate narrative of Nation that persists to the present day. The fact that she was able to achieve so much as a woman meant that she had violated the social norms of her era, a violation that permanently damaged her reputation and led to misconceptions about her that have survived well past the time when women were nearly universally distrusted for asserting themselves.

In 1962, self-published author Carleton Beals released a biography on Carry Nation that mostly follows Asbury’s version of who Nation was and does little to produce a better understanding of her. As one of Nation’s grandsons and a writer with no scholarly background, Beals was clearly too close to his subject to write an objective biography on Nation. Titled *Cyclone Carry: The Story of Carry Nation*, his book reads more like a stream-of-consciousness narrative than a serious scholarly work. Beals’ book primarily reinforces the existing stereotypes of Nation rather than offering any new perspectives. Beals uses far fewer sources than one would expect for a book that runs over three hundred pages, and as a result there is insufficient evidence to prove that his writing is factual rather than rumor-based. Considering his relationship to Nation, it is surprising that Beals did not use any primary sources, such as letters or journals, that the family had access to, indicating that he did not thoroughly research his subject. He included

⁷ Asbury, xxii.

in his bibliography a small selection of newspapers and magazines, as well as Asbury's biography, none of which he cited throughout the book. Moreover, Beals does not provide a coherent thesis, instead telling a romanticized story of Nation's life in a fictitious manner with no argument to tie it all together.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Lewis Taylor's 1966 work, *Vessel of Wrath: The Life and Times of Carry A. Nation*, is a thoughtful analysis of Nation that dabbles in the field of women's history—which, at this point, was just coming into existence—to supplement his focus on western history. It offers a largely favorable view of her and, unlike Asbury's biography, does not ascribe Nation's actions to insanity. Stating that “it is impossible to dismiss Nation as the product of mental weakness,” Taylor argues that in her time Nation was respected by women in the United States and abroad because she worked to give a voice to women who were ordinarily disempowered under the patriarchy.^{8 9} Taylor primarily uses newspaper articles to prove that Nation was widely misunderstood and thought of negatively during her life, but he also includes letters from women that show that Nation had supporters as well as critics, though those supporters mainly consisted of women. He writes that Nation “was the first real catalyst” in the Progressive Era wave of feminism and that she used her influence to encourage women to fight for their convictions by any means necessary.¹⁰ Taylor goes on to say that Nation's story is important as a warning of what happens when women are not taken seriously. This assertion is likely due to the uncertainty of where a push for rapid social change would lead in the decade

⁸ Robert Lewis Taylor, *Vessel of Wrath: The Life and Times of Carry A. Nation* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 6.

⁹ In the last decade of her life, Nation traveled to Canada and the United Kingdom, and letters and newspapers spread her message throughout Europe.

¹⁰ Taylor, 11.

Taylor was writing in; this same uncertainty is part of what defined the reactions to the temperance movement and to Nation's radical role in it during and after her lifetime. The activism and resurgence of feminism in the 1960s offered Taylor an environment in which he could study a figure as radical as Carry Nation without the stigma on unconventional women that was present when Asbury wrote his monograph in the 1920s.

Taylor argues that the unique environment of the West, where Nation spent most of her life, was a large part of what made her such a force to be reckoned with. By juxtaposing her against well-known western figures such as Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday, and Wild Bill Hickock, Taylor is able to emphasize the "suicidal courage" that Nation displayed in attempting to bring her ideals of lawfulness and civilization to the West.¹¹ Fran Grace similarly gives importance to regional history in her work and asserts that it is impossible to truly understand the religious motivations of Nation without understanding the differences between Protestantism in the American West and Protestantism in the Northeast. This regional bias does not only affect understanding of Nation's religion; it colors her entire narrative. Grace states that one of reasons behind the misconceptions about Nation is that Progressive-Era journalists who attempted to tell Nation's story were doing so only from the "northeastern pressrooms dominated by men with a distaste for Kansas politics and a bias against nonconforming women"¹² and that Asbury's monograph only enforced those misconceptions.

While Asbury—and to some extent Taylor—tends to regard Nation's religiosity as a weakness and an indicator of her declining mental health, Grace refutes this claim when analyzing the influence that Nation's religion had on her life. Grace argues that Nation's unique

¹¹ Taylor, 10.

¹² Grace, 279.

blend of different forms of Christianity (Roman Catholicism, slave religion, Baptism, and Evangelism) made her and the temperance movement more accessible to those who likewise did not fall into any form of mainstream Protestantism. Grace does entirely disregard criticisms of Nation's radicalism; she acknowledges that it is dangerous for any one person to claim that he or she is "the authority to decide moral truth for everyone," something that Nation was undeniably guilty of.¹³ Grace simply tries to put the negative aspects of Nation's religiosity into perspective rather than allowing them to enforce the belief that her religion contributed to and reflected her alleged insanity.

Grace's field in religious studies caused her to focus heavily on the impact that religion had on Nation's life, but her analysis also centers on women's history. Grace takes a feminist approach to studying Nation that Taylor touches on but does not fully explore. She writes that Nation's actions were the inevitable result of women being closed out of politics and that Nation's radicalism was the most efficient way of making her voice heard. Taylor, like Grace, argues that the turbulent path Nation chose was a rational response to women activists long having been repressed by male authorities any time they stepped out of their traditional place in society. He discusses her 1904 autobiography, *The Use and Need of the Life of Carry A. Nation*, as a means of proving that her actions were based in sound reasoning and not in insanity.

Grace's biography argues that Nation's perceived lack of femininity is overexaggerated because male historians have tended to compare her to Progressive Era, middle-class women living in the Northeast instead of considering that ideals of femininity were much different in the midwestern states that Nation spent most of her life in. Nation's reputation as "unsexed" is, Grace argues, the result of those in the Northeast imposing their beliefs about the ideal woman

¹³ Grace, 281.

onto the rest of the country. In reality, Nation was, if not exactly the ideal woman, not considered masculine in the Midwest because of the different expectations, practical needs, and societal roles of women there. Grace states that “harsh weather and rural conditions also helped to uncorset midwestern women from the ideal image of the true woman in the urban Northeast”;¹⁴ Asbury and the journalists whom he largely based his arguments on did not take this regional variation of feminine ideals into account when analyzing Nation.

Grace’s monograph is an overall successful attempt at reclaiming Nation’s story by delving into historical perspectives that had not been used when studying Nation in the decades prior. She uses gender, religious, regional, and social history to fully examine the complexity of Carry Nation’s life. Additionally, Grace is the only author to cite Nation’s autobiography extensively; she does not simply use it to gather facts but also to humanize Nation and argue that her actions were meant to advocate for women and American society at large. This work is a major shift in the small historiography on Nation, encouraging readers to look past the almost-century-old stereotypes about Nation and attempt to truly understand who she was rather than blindly accepting what has been said about her.

Asbury, Taylor, and Grace approach Carry Nation’s story in entirely different ways, each influenced by the values of the times they were writing in and the evidence they had available to them. Grace’s work was greatly benefitted by the discovery of primary documents in the 1990s (letters, diaries, and pictures provided by Nation’s descendants) that Asbury and Taylor did not have access to when they were writing their monographs. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Grace’s biography of Nation is the most well-rounded of the three and provides a view of Nation that had previously been unexplored. Despite idealistic differences in the era that all three

¹⁴ Grace, 9.

monographs were published in and a lack of evidence for the first two, Asbury, Taylor, and Grace agree on three things. The first is that religion was, for good or bad, at the core of who Carry Nation was. The second point of agreement is that Nation was—again, for good or bad—entirely unafraid of breaking out of the traditional role that society had assigned to her. Finally, they all argued that Nation was a key member of the temperance movement, regardless of whether or not she is recognized as such by other scholars of temperance and prohibition. Since Beals' work is not based on a thesis, is it difficult to say where his beliefs on Nation's role in the temperance movement and the enactment of Prohibition fall.

Carry Nation has not been given the attention that such a complex historical figure demands. Though she was described by friends as a well-intentioned, caring, and selfless supporter of women and children, these positive qualities have been overshadowed in much of the literature on her. However, each work on Nation is taking steps forward in remedying this. Since Asbury published the first monograph on Nation in 1929, recent historical perspectives—women's history, new western history, and changes in social history—have developed, allowing scholars the opportunity to study this intriguing prohibitionist from new angles and unearth Nation's true story. Should the historiography on Nation follow this trend, she will eventually be assigned the same importance as Francis Willard, and historians will hopefully write about her accordingly.

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