A Tribute to Michael J. McTighe’s *A Measure of Success*

Looking Forward from *A Measure of Success*: Protestants, Entrepreneurs, and Patriots at the Cleveland Centennial

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I want to acknowledge my professional debts to Mike McTighe. First, this book, *A Measure of Success*, his Encyclopedia of Cleveland History entries, and his many other publications, taught me, and other historians, almost everything we know about organized religion in Cleveland. Second, McTighe introduced me to some important people, institutions, and ideas: most important maybe, Rebecca Rouse, the chief mover and doer behind antebellum Protestant benevolent efforts, founder of the city’s first important poor relief society and of the Protestant Orphan Asylum, now Beech Brook. From McTighe I learned my first lesson in the absolutely pivotal role of women in church-related benevolence, a lesson which left an indelible mark on everything I have written since. Including this short paper.

The greatest success of *A Measure of Success* is its probing yet sympathetic portrait of Cleveland’s Protestant elite. McTighe faults these men for accommodating their religious principles to the needs of nascent capitalism—“annointing the commercial economy”; for distancing themselves from the working class; for being apathetic or ambivalent on the great moral issue of slavery. Yet McTighe describes them as genuinely committed to building a Christian community and painfully aware of conflicts between God and Mammon.

*A Measure of Success* is primarily interested in assessing the power of these energetic and determined players in Cleveland’s schools and benevolent institutions, as well as its economy, politics, and community rituals. This well-placed and well-heeled group “played a decisive role in creating and maintaining the values, attitudes and institutions that pervaded the city’s public life.”

Although powerful, they were not omnipotent, and by 1860, McTighe concludes, Cleveland’s Protestant elite constituted “a substantial but eroding presence,” their power diminished by the growing heterogeneity of the city’s population and the economic imperatives of flourishing commerce and industry.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I want to continue to flatter *A Measure of Success* by asking McTighe’s question - what happened to this Protestant presence? - and by using one of his strategies for assessing power - an analysis of the Protestant presence in a significant community ritual, the Cleveland Centennial of 1896. I have not compiled the careful tables which link men and women to Protestant churches, to property, and to political power, which undergird McTighe’s argument. Instead, I have relied almost exclusively on the *Official Report of the Cleveland Centennial*, a highly selective, very dubious source. However, I also learned from McTighe not to take anything academic too seriously. So here goes.

By 1890 industry had replaced commerce as Cleveland’s economic cornerstone. The city’s population of 261,353 was six times that of 1850; only about 16 percent were native-born of native parents. In 1850, Clevelanders attended 43 places of worship; in 1895, 275.

In 1890 Cleveland got two splendid votes of confidence from its citizens: the Arcade, symbol of local prosperity and progress; and the Garfield Memorial, Cleveland’s link to the martyred president and national significance. Three years later, as the city experienced its worst depression ever, two other significant buildings opened: Gray’s Armory and Central Armory. These fortress-like structures housed public meetings but also strike-breaking national guard and private troops, a response to recent incidents of violent labor unrest.

In this context of mingled self-congratulation and anxiety, the planning for the centennial celebration began. That celebration revealed that the religious convictions of the well-heeled, well-placed Protestant men, who planned and ran the centennial, had been supplanted by patriotism.
and entrepreneurship. Protestant churchwomen, on the other hand, had kept alive the earlier
traditions of benevolence and reform.

The inspiration for the centennial came from the Early Settlers' Association, representing the tiny
Protestant native-born elite. The idea of the centennial was quickly seconded by the Chamber of
Commerce. The Chamber, mayor Robert McElhenny, and the Early Settlers' Association appointed the
25 members of the official centennial commission. All were white and male, most were Protestant,
but more important, they were businessmen or politicians (thirteen were past or present office-
holders). None were ministers. The president of the Chamber of Commerce, Wilson M. Day, was
unanimously chosen full-time Director General of the centennial at a salary of $6,000 a year.

On July 4, 1894, Clevelanders dedicated the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, honoring the city's
contribution to the triumph of the Union over the Confederacy. Such patriotism, defined as the
glorification of military might, pervaded the Cleveland centennial, reflecting the nation's jingoistic
saber-rattling and big-navy building. In September, 1895, a mass meeting, intended as a centennial
kickoff, honored Oliver Hazard Perry's victory over the British on Lake Erie.

The chief address at this 1895 meeting celebrated the city's economic growth: its railroads,
industry, and capital. The speaker, J.W.G. Cowles so wonderfully represents the metamorphosis of
Protestantism that if he hadn't existed, I would have had to make him up. The son of a Congrega-
tional minister, Cowles entered the ministry himself but served God only briefly. In 1873 he went
into Cleveland real estate, specializing in buying and leasing land for railroads and industries and
managing the properties of John D. Rockefeller and Charles F Brush. In 1896 Cowles was chosen
both president of the Chamber of Commerce and head of the centennial's section on religion.

As in the antebellum period, these Protestant movers and doers were not omnipotent. They
raised enough money to construct on Public Square a large log cabin and a magnificent arch, 70
feet high and 102 feet across. They could not raise $180,000 to build an exposition hall. Nor could
they persuade the city or state governments to come up with a $50,000 subsidy for the celebra-
tion.

Their power was also challenged by Cleveland women. Excluded from all of the centennial
committees, they nevertheless insisted on participating. Badgered by Mrs. W.A. Ingham, the male
commission established a Woman's Department, which met separately and pursued its own agenda.

Like Cowles, Ingham is a representative figure. Like Cowles, she was the child of a Protestant
minister. Like Cowles, Ingham retired from her first job, which was teaching not the ministry, and
took up a second career not as a real estate broker, but as an activist for organized religion and
organized womanhood, especially the WCTU and the YWCA.

The centennial finally opened on Sunday, July 19, 1896 - the only day given over to religious
observances and the day which defined the centennial version of Protestantism - bland, de-natured,
offensive and inspiring to no-one. The Official Report noted that "Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish
congregations enter[ed] into the [centennial] theme with equal fervor and zeal." An afternoon
meeting in the Central Armory was blessed by the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio. The
major address, however, was given again by Cowles, who began accurately but rather inappropri-
ately by pointing out, "The first settlers in Cleveland were not religious men .... The motive that
brought them was not ... to found a Christian commonwealth but ... to improve their fortunes in
this new Connecticut." Once established, however, Cowles went on, the Protestant, Catholic, and
Jewish faiths each had made great contributions to the city. "I count myself happy this day," he
concluded, "in being called to speak for religion in its essence and its action, pure and simple,
broad and universal, which exists ... wherever moral beings are.""11

Men of the cloth made cameo appearances during the rest of the celebration, usually to give the
obligatory blessings on the proceedings, but for all practical purposes, religion had had its day in
the centennial sun. (And as a matter of fact, it rained most of the rest of the week.)

On Monday, July 20th, patriotism stepped front and center at the official dedication of Camp
Moses Cleaveland, where the Ohio National Guard and a detachment of United States regular troops
had been induced to encamp. The dress parades and display of the latest military hardware attracted thousands of admiring visitors.

Founders' Day, Wednesday, July 22, struck the martial note again, opening with "the booming of cannon" and "a centennial salute of one hundred guns." Politicians gave the chief addresses, highly partisan endorsements of former Ohio governor William McKinley in his presidential race against William Jennings Bryan. Then came an enormous five-mile long parade, advertising again patriotism and militarism. The mounted police and the Ninth New York Regiment Band stepped out in front of carriages of politicians, followed by brigade after brigade of men in uniform as 200,000 spectators cheered.

The centennial wasn't all sober speechifying and patriotic parading. Some events were strictly recreational: on July 27th, 5,000 cyclists took part in Wheelmen's Day. In August, thousands of citizens and visitors enjoyed the yacht regatta and a huge flower show at the Central Armory.

But if control of the past is any indication of cultural dominance and power - and who in this room doubts it? - the Protestants still ran this show. Certainly they controlled the very selective look at the city's past in celebrations of New England Day, Early Settlers' Day, and Western Reserve Day. Protestants also dominated the historical conference on religion: one paper on the Catholic Church (which claimed 100,000 members in 1895), one on the eight Jewish congregations, and six on the mainstream Protestant churches. 14

The centennial celebration ended on September 10 as it had begun: with "the roar of cannon ... augmented by a returning fire from guns on board the United States steamer Michigan ... in the harbor." Perry's 1813 victory one more time. Then followed the usual speeches by the usual politicians and the usual parade dominated by the usual military. And it was over.

When the smoke has cleared and the tumult and the shouting have died, what conclusions can we draw about the Protestant elite and its once-"substantial" power? Most obviously, that the political and economic elite were still Protestant and that they still had substantial power over the city's cultural life if this significant community ritual is any evidence.

Centennial Protestantism, however, was a non-denominational, non-sectarian, all-purpose religion. Only one Catholic priest had the bad manners to hint at the city's lingering nativism. 16 This Protestantism did not anguish between Mammon and God; the two were one, and that one was Mammon. The breast-beating and soul-searching of ante-bellum Protestants had been replaced by saber-rattling and flag-waving. The centennial planners, even more distant from the workers, had made almost no effort to include them except as spectators of the un-ending parades. Indeed during the centennial celebration itself, a long strike at Brown Hoisting and Conveying Machine Company prompted violence by both strikers and troops. 17 The question of racial justice, controversial in 1860, had completely disappeared by 1896. Martin E. Marty has called this accommodation of mainstream Protestantism to the status quo, "decorous worldliness." 18

Only the Woman's Department celebration on July 28 expressed the ante-bellum concern for a Christian community. Patriotism and boosterism were indeed in evidence, but the day focused on what this generation called "women's work" - the founding, funding, and administering of the city's benevolent institutions, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. 19

And only during this celebration did anyone suggest that all the news from Cleveland wasn't good. Suffragist Harriet Taylor Upton took a bleak look backward: "Just as our forefathers chafed under the English rule..., so did our foremothers wince under oppression and contend for greater advantages, never dreaming what was to follow.... [O]ur foremothers made it possible for us to establish a true Republic where each individual can develop himself as he may wish to do." 20 Kate Brownlee Sherwood concluded with a rousing call to social action which blasted the status quo. "It is time that we pioneer daughters of the pioneer mothers ... should return from the worship of the golden calf and imbue ourselves with the principles of fraternity that actuated them in their pursuit of happiness. Theirs was the primitive Christian household where no sharp lines were drawn.
between the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the exalted and the humbled. The spirit of primitive Christianity is the true spirit of the republic." So much for "decorous worldliness". Antebellum religious fervor survived in the Woman's Department because its members were first and foremost churchwomen, not entrepreneurs or politicians. As custodians of the private social welfare institutions, they were less distant from the city's poor than their husbands and fathers. Less marginalized than Cleveland's Catholics or Jews, or its immigrant or working-class population, these Protestant women nevertheless stood enough outside of the male power structure to see its imperfections.

All of this is clearly foreshadowed in McTighe's *A Measure of Success*. The accommodation of Protestantism to capitalism in the 1860s led to its capitulation by the 1890s. The gender-based division of labor which allocated to men wealth and political power and to women the job of picking up the pieces had its origins in the days of Rebecca Rouse. If one measure of success is the historian's ability to foresee the future, we need to pay McTighe's book still one more compliment.

**Notes**

5. Of the 1026 Clevelanders who had joined the Association from its founding in 1879 to 1893, only 42 had been born in Germany, only 11 in Ireland. *Annals of the Early Settlers Association of Cuyahoga County*, Volume 111, no. 11 (Cleveland: Williams Publishing Co., 1893), 107-37.
12. All clerical speakers at the centennial were Protestant except for two Catholics: Rev. George F. Houck and Monsignor T.P. Thorpe, and two Jews, Rabbi M. Machol, and on several occasions, Rabbi Moses J. Gries, a leader of Reform Judaism and son-in-law of respected businessman Kaufman Hays.
19. Cowles gave a patronizing address to the women which ended: "... as St. Paul tells us, "there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither bond nor free; there is neither male nor female; but one new creature - the unity of humanity in the Son of Man." Roberts, *Official Report*, 116-17.