The Use of Biography in Pentecostal Historiography

More than once in recent years it has been noted that there is an acute need for critical, analytical biographical treatments of influential figures in Pentecostal historiography (cf. Russell P. Spittler, “Suggested Areas for Further Research in Pentecostal Studies,” *Pneuma* 5:2 (1983), 49. For the most part that observation has gone unheeded. There are now signs that the increasing interest in the history of Pentecostalism may provide us with more such treatments.

To be sure, Pentecostals have not been totally bereft of interesting biographical and autobiographical works. Pentecostal leaders are often willing to share their personal “testimonies.” Some have been short; others long. Frank Bartleman, Agnes Ozman LaBerge, Thomas Ball Barratt, Elizabeth V. Baker, Andrew Urshan, Maria Woodworth-Etter, and Carrie Judd Montgomery were among the early luminaries who left autobiographical accounts.

Still other Pentecostal leaders have been the subject of a series of “devotional” biographies. Such people as “Joybringer” Fred F. Bosworth, Lillian Trasher, “The Nile Mother,” and William Branham, “A Man Sent from God” are stereotypical of the Pentecostal biography. Some have been privately published and offered for sale to those who would support the ministry of the biographical subject. Others have been duly “white-washed” or “sanitized” for publication in accordance with denominational specifications, sometimes to the point of masking the truth. Often, then, these treatments take on an “apologetic” cast.

A few of the more colorful figures on the Pentecostal landscape have been the subjects of numerous treatments. Aimee Semple McPherson published her autobiography, *This is That* in 1919, 1921, and 1923, revising it each time. *In The Service of The King* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927) brought her story up to date through 1926, including her version of her kidnapping and subsequent court hearings. Nine years later, following a trip around the world, Aimee told the story of that trip in *Give Me My Own God* (New York: H.C. Kinsey & Company, Inc., 1936). Its intent was clearly apologetic.

Other more or less “official” treatments of Aimee Semple McPherson have appeared since that time. *The Story of My Life* (Los Angeles: Echo Park Evangelistic Association, 1951), was issued under the editorship of Raymond W. Becker who worked from previous publications in which “Sister” had referred to her life story. Still later, Raymond L. Cox worked from a manuscript
which had been begun by Aimee but never completed, to produce *Aimee Semple McPherson: The Story of My Life* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1973).


In spite of all this, Aimee Semple McPherson and her contribution to Pentecostalism overall has not been adequately assessed in these many treatments. Garrison Keillor of *A Prairie Home Companion*, and author of *Lake Wobegon Days* remarked in a recent interview that Aimee Semple McPherson was the last of the great women evangelists, and she has been condemned on the basis of "one little incident." "Someone," he noted, "should rescue her reputation." Radix 17:4 (Spring, 1986), 11. The obvious implication is that her story is yet to be told well. The little I know of what she accomplished in Los Angeles alone is worthy of an objective critical treatment, in spite of what one might think about her "kidnapping."


It is only recently that David Edwin Harrell, Jr. has handed the Pentecostal Movement its first critical, objective, analytical, and