

Chas. H. Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926* (London, UK & Oakville, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2011), hardback, xxxii + 640 pp., ISBN: 978-1-84553-166-9, US\$ 80.00.

Chas. H. Barfoot should be thanked for writing an essential volume on the life and ministry of Aimee Semple McPherson. She was much endeared by her followers. She affectionately stated her relationship with them that “to the world, I might be Aimee, but to my own dear people I am ‘Sister.’”(477) “‘Sister Aimee,’ as she would fondly be called,” (2) the founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, is perceptively and vividly depicted in Barfoot’s colorful biography. Barfoot painted a portrait of Sister Aimee. He produced an interpretation of her life. The author has placed his research during the early years of the Pentecostal movement. His vast knowledge of the Pentecostal tradition that Sister Aimee has spearheaded and influenced is clearly evident in *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926*. Barfoot has produced a documentation of her scandalous life. The author also chronicled a readable story of her celebrated preaching career. However, he did not generate a strict academic writing about Sister Aimee. Rather, he delivers with a blending of rigorously studied public records and anecdotal materials, familiar events and journalistic accounts as well as personal letters and archive resources.

The many black and white photos in the pages of the book bring to life the narrative text. Barfoot’s presentation of this lady preacher is between the scholarly and the tabloid. Although, he keeps away from a popular hagiography and employs the historical framework of the Pentecostal revival, nonetheless, he has a subjective tendency of putting his personal knowledge and love for Sister Aimee in his prose. This use of personal note is not to be taken as a negative at all. It is a writing style that is distinctive and can be treated as more valuable in writing a life story of a remarkable woman. It is notable that he prevents himself from magnifying the scandals or focusing on the idealistic. Reasonably, Barfoot attempts to capture a picture of a lady preacher in her elusiveness. The author is optimistic about the contribution of Sister Aimee to contemporary Pentecostalism and American life: “By ingeniously uniting as one both the sacred and secular, she became the movement’s most glamorous symbol of success and its most visible spokesperson. An innovative and charismatic leader, she charted the course and blazed the trail for the movement’s future.” (xxiii)

Sister Aimee understood the American culture. She capitalized on it. She did not shy away from the combining of the spiritual and the nonspiritual. She made the Pentecostal expression of faith tolerable to the taste of the mainline Protestants of America. Barfoot has that sense of strong connection with Aimee Semple McPherson. The reader will not miss the respect and affection of the author as he resurrected Sister Aimee in his book. It is not only his academic background and proficient qualification as well as his family upbringing and religious heritage that made him competent to write this valuable biography but most of all there is that continuity that he embodies in himself with her. The author's preface and acknowledgments show his sympathy and attachment to Sister Aimee. Her story is his story. The writing of her biography is telling the story that must be told! And so, Barfoot tells the story of Aimee Semple McPherson in twenty-one chapters. These chapters are entertaining. It is hard not to be ardently affected and sympathetically attached to this remarkable woman of faith as one gets to know her through the pen of Barfoot. The reviewer is carried emotionally by the ups and downs of Sister Aimee. The author is very sympathetic to her. The biographical details, the names and circumstances of people around her, the concurrent historical events that happened during her lifetime and the insightful commentaries are beautifully woven together.

Barfoot starts with her birth during the autumn of 1890 (October 9, 1890) in a Canadian farm and at the same time talks about her funeral in October 1944 in the first page of chapter one. She was born as Aimee Elizabeth Kennedy, lived a short but significant life, and died as a sophisticated woman. (1) After some details on the circumstances of her early life and the significant influence of her parents until she met Robert Semple (2 ff.), the narrative moves to Sister Aimee's love life and subsequent marriage to this Pentecostal "preacher who died young in the second chapter." In chapter three, Sister Aimee's Jonah syndrome has been highlighted after the death of her first husband Robert Semple, the birth of her daughter Roberta Star Kennedy Semple and her subsequent remarriage to Harold McPherson that brought Rolf Potter Kennedy McPherson into this life. The next two chapters talk about the thriving ministry of the McPhersons and the sad story of their parting of ways. The sixth and seventh chapters transport the story of Sister Aimee's life to California, underlining her connections to Los Angeles and Azusa Street. "The Beautiful Woman in White" is the title of the following chapter because Sister Aimee "was remembered" as "being 'very good looking and she dressed always in a white uniform.'" (161) This chapter also mentions how Sister Aimee influenced Hollywood celebrities like Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe,

Anthony Quinn and Charlie Chaplin. (172) In chapters nine, ten and eleven the accounts of Barfoot demonstrate how Sister Aimee was daring enough to walk in between the sacred and the secular, “popular religious culture” and “high church culture” as well as the Pentecostal practice and high class church.

The next half of the volume maps the geographical success and the notable impression of Sister Aimee in the American society of her time and also her scandalous disappearance and return. The succeeding seven chapters highlight the locations in the United States where Sister Aimee made lasting impact. They are San Diego, California, Denver, Colorado, Northern California, Rochester, New York, Wichita, Kansas, Oakland, California and Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, California. The subsequent chapter is a chronicle of how Pentecostalism has come to the American Protestants, particularly the Methodists, wherein Sister Aimee served as a bridge. (421-428) The title of chapter twenty is “May 18, 1926.” After describing the different success stories of Sister Aimee, the author relate the circumstances of the news that the famous lady preacher was drowned and her remains were not found. (455 ff.) The last chapter explains her vanishing because of her alleged abduction and her later appearance on June 23, 1926 in Douglas, Arizona.

In his epilogue, Barfoot reflects on the testimonial experiences of people, the historical appropriation of religion in the society and the pursuit of genuine spiritual encounter. His insight is thought provoking: “. . . Pentecostalism is thriving today, and religion is still with us, because for many people, it simply works.” (529) The story of such a remarkable woman who contributed so much to the Pentecostal movement is still with us today. What she has started still works for today. Her contribution to the Pentecostal faith should be understood as a source of inspiration and strength. *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926* is not only an enjoyable read but also an important spiritual reminder and a human challenge. God chooses to use flawed people.

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