

Julie Debra Neuffer. *Helen Andelin and the Fascinating Womanhood Movement*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Mary Jane Woodger

In writing *Helen Andelin and the Fascinating Womanhood Movement*, it was Julie Debra Neuffer's hope that her study would "provide a scholarly and evenhanded look at the philosophy and motivations of . . . Helen Andelin and the movement she founded, within the larger historical context of women's reform efforts" (4). Neuffer reached this goal, for, having finished the book, I am still unsure if Neuffer is for or against Andelin's philosophy. Though she is sympathetic to Andelin, Neuffer's portrayal is accurate, impartial, and unbiased.

While growing up, I heard about *Fascinating Womanhood* (FW) but did not realize the scope of the movement's influence on millions of women in the twentieth century. The movement sought to demarcate feminine roles and gifts rather than close the gender gap; a woman's "essential nature" (39) could bring love and order to a marriage. Neuffer's biography gives an unprecedented view of a neglected topic in twentieth-century women's history, gender studies, women's studies, and Mormon studies.

One contribution of Neuffer's work is to show that Andelin's FW movement was an alternative to the ideas forwarded by the women's liberation movement (159). This volume makes the study of the "femininity women's movement" a part of a growing body of scholarship that expands the definition of the women's movement in politics and religion during the 1960s and 1970s (3). Neuffer's research brings us an understanding of Andelin's "wide appeal as both a religious and political leader," which augmented "the fast-expanding discussion about women's strategies to cope with—and shape—political and social change" (3). As Neuffer explains, "In order to fully understand the feminist movement, one must also understand the fascinating womanhood movement" (x). This important scholarship gives us that understanding and shows that

“*FW* represented a significant aspect of a growing political and social backlash to the era’s turbulence, which many feared was eroding traditional institutions and values” (2). Neuffer introduces her readers to another side of the women’s movement in her juxtaposition of Andelin’s *Fascinating Womanhood* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*.

Another outstanding contribution of this biography is that it gives, with thoughtful empathy, a clear lens to Andelin’s motivation; Neuffer’s analysis provides remarkable insight into Andelin’s personality and character. For instance, Neuffer explains that one of the reasons Andelin was so appealing amid hostile and vocal criticism (89) was “that she refused to play by the rule of intellectual arguments. . . . While she was often booed by live audiences, it was nearly impossible for her detractors to wage a war of words. . . . Mostly she just refused to bend to convention” (116–17). Neuffer puts flesh on her subject as she describes “Andelin’s personal magnetism, over-the-top femininity and prim self-righteousness” in vivid detail (117). Behind-the-scenes disclosures, such as Andelin’s surgical facelift at age forty-seven, bring new light to how she personally engaged her convictions (75).

The triumphs and tragedies of Andelin’s life are well documented. Readers come away with a profound understanding of the often complex, sometimes ambivalent, generally loving, and mutually supportive relationship that existed between Helen and Aubrey Andelin throughout their fifty-seven-year marriage and business partnership.

Neuffer’s research of Andelin’s complex and changing relationship with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also contributes to the body of scholarship. Readers will see Andelin serving as both a single and senior missionary but also calling General Relief Society President Barbara B. Smith one of her greatest enemies (121). Though Andelin felt it was her mission to write *FW* (41) and even quoted President David O. McKay in the book, in the 1990s she called certain LDS leaders “uninspired men in business suits” (122). She had wanted those leaders to endorse *FW* for churchwide use (120), but the Church navigated away from her movement (103). In the end, Neuffer shows Andelin struggling between her loyalty to *FW* and her loyalty to the Church, unable to fully overcome the grudge against Church leaders for failing to endorse her program (121–24).

Neuffer’s qualifications for research in this area of expertise include a PhD in American history from Washington State University. Currently, she is an adjunct instructor of American history at Eastern Washington University and affiliated with the American Historical

Association Organization of American Historians, Western Association of Women Historians, American Academy of Religion, and the Mormon History Association. This book, her first, was awarded “The Best Biography Prize” in June 2015 by the Mormon History Association. Neuffer also lists other unique qualifications for writing about this topic. As she puts it, she “had been raised as a Fascinating woman,” was familiar with the philosophy, and had an understanding for the women who adopted the movement (viii).

Neuffer’s sources are a biographer’s dream, including over thirty hours of recorded personal interviews conducted with Helen Andelin herself, her children, and former *FW* teachers. Neuffer scoured hundreds of private letters to Andelin from *FW* followers as well as support materials such as teaching manuals, newsletters, newspaper clippings, and nearly a thousand completed *FW* teacher application forms. She also had access to Andelin’s personal papers, located in the special collections archive of the Marriott Library at the University of Utah (4). The scholarship is solid and meticulously documented.

The book’s strengths far outweigh any weaknesses that might detract from its overall quality. One of the few shortcomings is a small number of unsupported generalizations. By way of illustration, Neuffer states that Andelin “did not believe in some of the basic tenets of the Mormon Church” (ix). I am curious to know what those beliefs included. In another passage, Neuffer states that Andelin’s daughter negates the idea that her mother used material from eight booklets published in 1922 that were titled *The Secrets of Fascinating Womanhood, or The Art of Attracting Men*. It would have been easy to refute the daughter’s claim by comparing *FW* with the pamphlets. In another passage, Neuffer states, “Andelin’s instructions to perform only ladylike tasks were, at least to [Barbara B.] Smith, materialistic” (123). There is no citation to support this statement either.

Similarly, some assumptions are unsubstantiated. Neuffer makes the case that John Gray’s *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, P. B. Wilson’s *Liberated through Submission: God’s Design for Freedom in All Relationships*, Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider’s *The Rules: Time Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*, Laura Schlesinger’s *Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*, and Dr. Phil McGraw’s *Love Smart: Find the One You Want—Fix the One You Got* used “key aspects of the *FW* philosophy, that Andelin had made famous a generation earlier” (148). Neuffer later admits that “although it is likely that these modern-day relationship experts don’t know who Helen Andelin is, they continue to

be guided by the ideas that distinguished her” (158). While such an argument may be sound, support is not provided that these authors used Andelin’s book or her ideas. The *FW* philosophy, according to Neuffer, had been around at least since 1922, and these subsequent authors could be drawing from general knowledge rather than Andelin’s work.

One other very small distraction is in the organization of the six non-chronological chapters. Sometimes the timeline of Andelin’s life seems muddled, and a chronological treatment may have served the biography better. The same material is covered in several chapters, such as the subject of *FW* teachers applications. Sometimes material is squeezed into a chapter that is unrelated to that chapter’s topic, which can awkwardly interrupt the narrative.

These small limitations in no way preclude me from highly recommending *Helen Andelin and the Fascinating Womanhood Movement*. The growth of Andelin’s philosophy into an international phenomenon is a “fascinating” read, and there is much to be explored. This important work gives us a new glimpse into twentieth-century women’s history and is essential reading for all students of Mormon studies.

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