

William E. Ellis. "A Man of Books and a Man of the People:" *E. Y. Mullins and the Crisis of Moderate Southern Baptist Leadership*, Baptists: History, Literature, Theology, Hymns. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003. Pp. xi, 228. \$30.00, paper.

In this monograph, still the only published scholarly biography of Edgar Young Mullins, William Ellis presents a well-researched and fair portrait of the Baptist theologian and seminary administrator. At the original publication of this book, Ellis was professor of history at Eastern Kentucky University. He has since retired from that position and now serves as that institution's University Historian and occasionally as an adjunct professor at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky.

The first years of the twentieth century witnessed a good deal of denominational turmoil amid Southern Baptists. Landmarkist opinions among Baptists in the South eventually evolved into fundamentalism, setting the stage for the epic battles over theological modernism that characterized the 1920s. Because of E. Y. Mullins's leadership of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and later of the entire Southern Baptist Convention, Mullins's life presents an excellent lens through which to analyze these events.

Mullins was born in Mississippi on the eve of the Civil War and eventually obtained a thoroughly Southern undergraduate education at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas. Ellis traces much of Mullins's essential conservatism to this background. Additionally, Ellis identifies Mullins's experiences in his pre-seminary presidency pastorates as factors that contributed to his later theological and social positions. While in Baltimore, for instance, Mullins's experiences in the inner city nudged him towards a moderate adoption of the Social Gospel. Ironically, Mullins's pastorates outside the South simultaneously steered Mullins's thought in a moderate direction and kept him out of the denominational battle over Baptist origins that cost William Whitsitt his job as president of Southern Seminary. Because of his distance from Louisville during this controversy, Mullins was identified with neither faction in the struggle and was therefore elected as Whitsitt's successor. Despite the fact that he was probably one of the most progressive pastors ever to have graduated from Southern Seminary, Mullins somehow emerged as the ideal compromise candidate.

The irony underneath this development is not lost on Ellis. On the one hand, Mullins spent his career attempting to interact with modernist theology in a way that was appreciative without abandoning his own evangelical commitments. On the other hand, Mullins was charged with leadership within a denomination where "those whom fundamentalists identified as modernists, in Mullins's time and since, were actually moderates" (p. x). In other words, while Mullins offered his best efforts in leading the seminary (and later the entire convention) through a method of compromise that was calculated to keep him on a *via media* and out of either camp, it eventually became apparent that attempting to articulate such a middle position placed him squarely in the party eventually defeated by the fundamentalists. This is the thesis that Ellis successfully defends.

Ellis uses the controversy over evolution as the example *par excellence* of Mullins's failure as a theological leader among Southern Baptists. Mullins seems to have accepted a form of theistic evolution, although he consistently attempted to use the word "development" rather than "evolution" in order to distinguish his own opinions from those of secular authors who were not concerned to keep a deity in the picture. For the most part, Mullins was never able to persuade his Fundamentalist brethren that his own perspective on the issue of evolution was within the pale of biblical orthodoxy. For Ellis, however, Mullins's defeat in the wake of the

1926 convention and his capitulation to a financial ultimatum from Oklahoma Baptists is an indicator not of personal weakness but of the inevitable results of a difficult situation. Ellis is very specific in his chastisement of historians such as Norman Furniss that have criticized Mullins for his weak leadership during the evolution controversy of the 1920s. Citing Mullins's declining health and the solidification of fundamentalism as a movement during that time period, Ellis essentially contends that the circumstances of the times prevented Mullins from emerging victorious from the controversy. In this sense, Ellis serves as an apologist for Mullins, providing a rationale for his defeat as a theological leader among Southern Baptists.

At the same time, Ellis has refused to present a hagiography of Mullins. The theologian and administrator is consistently portrayed in *A Man of Books and A Man of the People* as being concerned with his own prestige and upward mobility. Mullins's personal ambition bordered on obsession, eventually leading to the building of a new campus for Southern Seminary but nearly bankrupting the institution in the process. Ellis does not shy away from the fact that Mullins accepted raises in his own presidential salary while his professors went without, even while stifling their desires for greater denominational influence and input into the leadership of the seminary.

While the strengths of this volume are many, the greatest of these may be Ellis' focus on the social environment that shaped Mullins's thought and behavior. Although Ellis spends three or four pages discussing the influences of thinkers such as William James and Borden Parker Bowne on Mullins's theology, the author places much greater emphasis on Mullins's early educational and pastoral experiences as a way of explaining his intellectual tendencies. Ellis also continually places before his reader the thesis that Mullins's thought was not the product of a thinker that had the luxury of letting his mind wander where it would; instead, Mullins used his theological output as a tool for denominational leadership and consolidation. According to Ellis, Mullins's first realization upon taking the reins of Southern Seminary in 1899 was the intimate relationship between the school's financial health and its perceived level of doctrinal orthodoxy. Later, this need to present an orthodox image for the sake of the seminary's finances broadened into a concern for peace within wider Baptist life. Mullins's 1917 systematic theology, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, for instance, is described as Mullins's "last best hope for saving centrist Christian theology, and, thereby, holding together the contending religious parties already clearly evident in the country" (p. 125).

This monograph, painstakingly pieced together from minutes of denominational meetings, personal letters, Mullins's own works, and other materials stored in archives located in both the North and South, is both clear and concise. Its subject matter and readability make it a key text for those with any interest in Baptist history, Southern religious history, or the history of the Fundamentalist movement. Although Ellis' text is more than 20 years old, this recent reprint by Mercer University Press is undoubtedly a testimony to the quality of this excellent work.

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