

Randal L. Hall, *William Louis Poteat: Leader of the Progressive-Era South*, Religion in the South Series, Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2000. Pp. ix, 262. \$40.00, cloth.

Randal L. Hall's biography of William Louis Poteat (1856–1938) is an engaging study of one of the most celebrated educators in the early twentieth-century South. A tireless reformer his entire life, Poteat promoted a rare combination of tradition, modern science, and social Christianity. He was born into the comfort of an aristocratic southern family on a plantation in Caswell County, North Carolina in 1856, where religion, paternalism, grace, stewardship, and intellectual pursuit defined genteel life. From this background Poteat developed the ideal of an organic, moral community that would govern his thinking throughout his career. Poteat attended Wake Forest College from 1872–1877 where, upon graduation, he began to serve as a biology professor. Quickly earning an academic reputation for himself, he assumed the presidency of the college, a position he held from 1905–1927. An inspiration to southern liberals, he left a legacy that inspired a growing intellectual tradition in the South.

Under Poteat's leadership, Wake Forest experienced educational renewal. Hiring faculty with graduate degrees, expanding curriculum, and utilizing laboratory investigation in the teaching of science all placed the college on a modernizing path. He was persistent in the pursuit of knowledge in a region that doggedly resisted innovation and experimentation. It was in the area of religion and science, however, that Poteat made his most important contribution. He was comfortable with Biblical criticism having been inspired by the works of Joseph Renan, David Friedrich Strauss, and others. For Poteat, unlike many in the South, evolution posed no threat to faith. God, reasoned Poteat, was manifest in nature but remained a transcendent authority as well. In essence, evolution was part of God's plan. During the period 1880–1920, Poteat reached the apogee of his reform efforts. Hall rightly contends that Poteat advocated a liberal philosophy that was in full accord with the goals of the Progressive movement. His work among North Carolina educational groups, social service organizations, and interracial agencies placed Poteat and North Carolina in the forefront of southern academic and reform circles. Recognizing the potential fallout that often accompanied change in traditional society, Poteat wisely labored to build consensus before introducing his ideas.

Despite his devotion to implementing change in southern society, Hall notes that Poteat was reluctant to employ more radical measures to achieve the organic, moral community he so ardently envisioned. In so observing, Hall has exposed the limitations of Poteat's progressive thinking. His inability to sacrifice traditional mores and individual religious conversion in favor of systemic change precluded extensive reform in North Carolina. According to Poteat, organized religious groups were the most important means for effecting social change. Denominational higher education would provide the leadership for the "building of culture" and uplifting of character. In Poteat's antebellum worldview, Christianity, culture, and education were never separate entities.

For example, while Poteat railed against the "rootlessness" and "drifting" that he associated with urban life, he was often silent on the impoverishment of luckless sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and child laborers in rural areas. Textile magnates and landowners, whose harsh managerial measures played such an important part in keeping the South in a depressed economic state, were simply beyond reproach. He accepted black leadership within the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, but he stopped short of accepting African Americans as

equal partners in his moral community. He thundered against Ku Klux Klan activity but he declined to support a national anti-lynching law because it usurped local law. To maintain all the components of a well-ordered community, Poteat supported the pseudo-science of eugenics, rapidly gaining favor among some intellectuals after the turn of the century. He supported “selective breeding” through forced sterilization to effectively eliminate the mentally challenged, alcoholics, and others he regarded as “unfit.” For Poteat’s well-ordered, moral community, eugenics provided the means to purge inferior and dangerous elements from society. While influenced by the reform efforts of the social gospellers, Poteat nonetheless placed evangelism ahead of social amelioration. The Social Gospel movement never gained a mass following, but it did expose inequities in the American economic and political structures. Again, Poteat was hesitant to work for systemic change. A telling illustration of this hesitation occurred at the Southern Sociological Congress in 1913 when, in a presentation, prominent social gospeller Walter Rauschenbusch forcefully called upon the nation to address corporate avarice, child labor, a minimum wage, women’s labor, and worker safety. Following Rauschenbusch to the podium, Poteat’s message, by contrast, called for individual conversion. For Poteat, individual conversion and dedication to inner righteousness, not radical social panaceas, were the necessary mechanisms to fashion the ideal moral community.

From the 1920s onward, Poteat’s ideas fell into disfavor. Conservative Baptists took aim at the liberalizing tendencies he introduced in religion and education. The demands of the Great Depression weakened his ideal of an organic community. His unwavering attempt to apply the principles of Christian brotherhood to economic problems failed to resonate as Americans began to adopt more practical and immediate measures to relieve poverty.

In spite of Poteat’s uneasy alliance between traditional individualism and social concern, he was successful in introducing progressive measures into North Carolina and he remained a beacon of hope and inspiration for southern intellectuals throughout the South. Poteat’s adherence to tradition and social change afforded him the opportunity to serve his state and region well, especially in the field of education. Perhaps the greatest accolade was heard from H.L. Mencken, the journalist who had made a career in bashing the South. Mencken applauded Poteat for his intellectual courage in a region that often refused to acknowledge academic prowess.

In this work, Hall has skillfully brought to the surface the accomplishments of a southern educator while also revealing the limitations in his thinking. Yet, on a more comprehensive level, Hall manages to shed light on virtually every complex issue confronted by reformers during a turbulent time in southern history. Accordingly, Hall has not only provided a superb biography of a brilliant educator, but has delivered a thorough account of early twentieth-century southern history as well. A first-rate study, the book will enrich a growing body of literature on southern reform efforts.

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