war, and Chapter 8 examines the changing nature and role of presenters on television, which includes some responses to his user study.

This is a readable book and Dillon has certainly done us all a great service in digging out many long-forgotten history programmes of the post-war period. He makes a strong case for his insistence that history has always been a staple of British television and that many programmes of the so-called ‘history boom’ have their roots in much earlier examples. The mass of material is clearly difficult to organise and the quantity Dillon offers tends to lack systematic analysis. The earlier chapters have some chronological shape but Dillon has a tendency to introduce contemporary examples into his discussions thereby rendering these chapters, ironically enough, somewhat ahistorical. The remaining themed chapters suffer equally from this problem. The structure also produces strange anomalies, such as the discussion of ITV’s series World at War in Chapter 7 and its exclusion from consideration of the period of the BBC/ITV duopoly. In his final chapter, he returns to nation, national identity and memory but it is a struggle to see how these themes have been woven through the book and we are given no guidance from his introduction. There is a substantial and growing literature on these topics (history on television, memory and media, for example), and some excellent work examining the complexities of reality television or lived history with which the author has not engaged. This work would have provided more interesting sources and opportunities for engagement than the often anecdotal and journalistic material upon which the author has drawn largely to demonstrate his own points. I feel that Dillon had limited himself to his original period (1946–1986), he could have produced a more detailed and valuable historical analysis of this important subject.

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Cordelia Moyse
Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2009
316 pp., ISBN 9781843835134 (£50.00)

This fascinating and timely new book on the history of the Mothers’ Union (MU), the largest women’s society within the Church of England with a worldwide membership of some 4 million women, makes a significant contribution to the history of women’s voluntary organisations, women’s lives and female agency in the UK and beyond over the last 130 years. In charting the history of what was to quickly become a worldwide network of Anglican women, Moyse also succeeds in skilfully placing the growth and development of the MU within both its religious and global context. This difficult task
is achieved by the clever structure of the book, which is divided into four chronological
periods and three thematic strands. As the author explains, this format allows readers
to focus on a particular period or theme. The time periods are, therefore, divided up
into appropriate blocks charting the origins of the MU from 1876 to 1909, the
‘golden era’ of the MU from 1910 to 1944 and the post-war period of 1945–1974
during which the MU had to take radical steps to remain relevant in a rapidly changing
world. The final section provides a more general overview of the work of the MU over
the last 30 years. The thematic strands also work well, reflecting the character of the
organisation and its major spheres of activity, namely identity and spirituality,
mariage and family life and membership and worldwide work. A number of useful
appendices are included which chart the changes made to the MU’s objects over time,
the prayers commonly used by members and brief biographical notes on central and
worldwide presidents.

Although there have been previous institutional histories of the MU, most notably
Olive Parker’s For the Family’s Sake: A History of the Mothers’ Union 1876–1976,
Moyse manages to avoid the pitfalls of ‘in-house’ histories which can at times lack the
critical and historical rigour required of more objective and academic historical
accounts. The fact that Moyse was at one time the MU’s archivist and was herself a
member and branch leader within the organisation does not impinge on her ability to
provide a critical assessment of the success and failures of the MU. What results is a
well-written, well-informed and insightful account of the development of what is now
a global NGO from its humble beginnings in a drawing room in Old Alresford in 1876
when Mary Sumner, a vicar’s wife, set up the first branch of the MU with the aim of
helping women through mutual support, prayer and education to fulfil their
‘god-given’ duty as mothers.

Each of the 11 chapters traces in detail the highs and lows of the MU’s long and at
times difficult journey to navigate the choppy waters of the major political, social and
economic changes that impacted on the lives of its members throughout the twentieth
century. As Moyse argues, the MU not only had to adjust to the changing experiences
and priorities of women in the UK, but in addition had to constantly review its
relationship to and role within the Church of England, which on occasion became
strained and confrontational. This is most evident in relation to the MU’s
commitment to the sanctity of marriage and its objection to divorce law reform. This
policy resulted in the Union adopting a more hard-line approach to marriage break-
up than that of the Church of England and wider society from the late 1930s. It was in
response to this growing gulf in opinion that the MU reviewed its objectives in the
early 1970s and for the first time allowed the admittance of divorced women to the
organisation.

From 1910, the MU also had to adapt to its role as a worldwide organisation with
members spread across the Empire. Over the years, it had to frequently re-assess its
Anglican identity and objectives in light of the challenges it faced in leading an
organisation that was operating in a diverse range of cultural, geographical and
political contexts. Through the effective use of case studies, Moyse documents how the
MU dealt with issues such as colonialism, racism, evangelicalism, local religious practice and political oppression. By the 1960s, a growing demand for greater autonomy amongst its overseas affiliates threatened to pull the MU apart but once again it survived through compromise and negotiation. One of the major strengths of this book, therefore, is the way in which Moyse highlights the ability of the MU to adapt, albeit slowly at times, to change.

What is perhaps less well drawn out is the impact that the MU has made in campaigning for the right of women to a high standard of support from the state. Moyse writes that the MU is one of the ‘few campaigning organisations that has served women both before and after the granting of female suffrage in most of the countries where it now operates, and in the colonial and post-colonial worlds’ (p. 251). Yet in spite of this recognition, she appears reluctant to acknowledge the contribution that the MU has made to the history of the women’s movement in the UK and elsewhere. There is little reference here to the active participation of the MU in campaigning for the right of women to good housing, family allowances, better healthcare and a raft of other key reforms which have been the subject of my own work on the history of the MU. Moyse mistakenly suggests that to acknowledge the contribution of the MU to these campaigns is to suggest that it was part of the feminist movement (pp. 9–10, 117).

Instead it can be argued that the term women’s movement should include the work of all women’s organisations seeking to enhance women’s lives and should not be limited to groups which espouse feminist ideology, something that the MU never did. This more inclusive definition of the women’s movement will ensure that conservative women’s groups, such as the MU, will be restored to the historical record, an aim I share with the author of this book. One other issue which puzzled me was the author’s assertion that she was given exclusive access to the MU archive, now housed in Lambeth Palace Library. This archive, which is a wonderful source of information for researchers, was previously held at Mary Sumner House where I was given free access to the rich and detailed records. This, however, is a minor detail about what is a very important book which provides an accessible, detailed and nuanced history of one of the most important voluntary organisations for women in the twentieth century. There is no doubt that the book will appeal to the general reader, and should be required reading for all academics and students working in the fields of social, cultural, religious and political history.

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