

Women of Devotion Through the Centuries

By Cheryl Forbes | Reviewed by Evelyn Bence

Cheryl Forbes's first book, released in 1983 when she held a managerial position at Zondervan, was titled *The Religion of Power*. As that title suggests, she holds strong views. "At a certain point, a Christian must say no to maneuvers and manipulations, to politics and pretendings."

Forbes now is in secular academia, teaching rhetoric in writing, and she's turned her research attention to selected women who have unwittingly wielded a great deal of influence if not power, particularly in the twentieth century: devotional writers or compilers, principally a woman known for decades as Mrs. Chas. E. Cowman and the earlier Mary Wilder Tileston, compiler of the 1884 book of 365 dated readings, *Daily Strength for Daily Needs* (still in print).

Forbes, who is married but has never taken her husband's name, first took an interest in the publishing history of Lettie Cowman's (yes, she had a personal name) compiled daybook *Streams in the Desert*, in print since 1925, largely with Zondervan, and rival to *My Utmost for His Highest* (Oswald Chambers) "as the best-known fundamentalist devotional of the twentieth-century." The Cowmans founded the Oriental Missionary Society, now OMS International, which Lettie "ran" after Mr. Cowman's death (at 56 after a long illness); as a widow she also wrote a magazine column and published seven books, including a biography of "Greatheart," as she came to call her husband.

"Much of Mrs. Cowman's life" was "a strange blend of bathos and business," says Forbes, whose book is an unusual blend of women's history, literary criticism, and chatty personal comment ("it would not have surprised me had I learned that she kept the room where he died as a shrine").

Cowman's devotional formula—a daily scripture followed by several related quotations—predated her, in volumes such as Tileston's *Daily Strength*, owned and dog-eared ("held together with a rubber band") by Cowman. Other "scrap-book" devotionals were published and popular, but Tileston's devotionals (she published some thirty) and Cowman's have remained popular, Forbes proposes, for their common and unusual elements.

First, they provide "something for everyone." Cowman, in the forefront of the Holiness movement, selectively cut and pasted from sources clearly outside her theological camp, such as George Eliot and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Tileston, whose personal theology is harder to discern (she was raised Unitarian), quoted eclectically, from Ruskin to Aquinas to Milton.

Second, they masterfully wove together quotations that played off each other to support a daily theme. Forbes at length shows new respect for the art of fine compiling. "What other printed

page can and should be read from top to bottom and then again from bottom to top?" She gives half a chapter to a third popular compiler whose work is found in Cowman archives, Mrs. C. S. DeRose, whose work is long out of print, partially because "There is...a lack of purpose or harmony...despite an occasional, emerging theme."

Third, the books of Cowman and Tileston with some complexity consistently addressed overriding themes of the lives of their generally female readership: suffering, comfort, triumph. "Mrs. Cowman's vision is fraught with contradictions, twists, reversals, paradoxes, and theological conundrums. It is personal and impersonal, triumphant and tragic, hierarchical and egalitarian. Still, it offers a way for readers, women in particular, to make sense of the inescapable, inevitable, essential daily hardships of life. Not in spite of, but because of her contradictions, paradoxes, and indifference to theological niceties, Mrs. Cowman gives readers hope." Her work is "of great significance in understanding women's spirituality in twentieth-century America."

Fourth, Cowman and Tileston drew heavily on female authors and poets, contemporary and historical, including Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena. "It is rare not to find at least one woman excerpted in nearly every [daily] entry of Tileston's works." Forbes allots fifty pages to biographical and literary profiles of nine mostly contemporary women repeatedly cited by Cowman, Tileston, and DeRose. Most, though well published a hundred years ago, are now lost to the collective memory: Adelaide Procter, Anna Shipton, Dinah Muloch Craik, Mary Ann Schimmelpennick, Lucy Larcom, Lydia Maria Child, Margaret Bottome (Christina Rossetti and Madame Guyon being exceptions).

Then Forbes moves back in time to sketches and analysis of Catholic mystics (why Madame Guyon isn't in this chapter, I'm not sure), Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Genoa (a.k.a. Catherine Adorna) and of Siena, Margery Kempe, and Julian, analyzing how the work of each "intersects with that of the others and with the compilers of daily devotionals."

Forbes finally says, "If there is a single thread that connects every [devotional writer discussed], it is suffering. These women had a way of taking seriously the common experiences of suffering so that readers know that their lives have meaning, purpose, and value. All this with few specifics."

Some of Forbes's most interesting commentary is in her epilogue, in which she looks at two current best-selling devotional writers, Kathleen Norris (*Cloister Walk*), "heir" of the "medieval writers" and the "Victorian devotionalists," and Sarah Ban Breathnach, author of the secular *Simple Abundance*. "The source of Breathnach's rest is the Self, herself, yourself, myself. The source of comfort for Tileston, Cowman . . . is God. They believed that the self was the source of the problem, not the place to look for the solution."

Forbes admits to starting her research with a cold, even prejudiced, eye. "I had an innate suspicion of [devotional books] as being sloppy, anti-intellectual, patronizing to the reader." But

“once I began to read these devotionals, and read them daily, I realized that I was the anti-intellectual, I the sloppy, patronizing person.”

Forbes challenges readers to take another look at the lives and work of these female compilers and writers. Of Tileston’s *Great Souls at Prayer*, she says, “No one who reads such prayers every day of the year will be the same person on December 31 as she was on January 1. I know.” Remember, Forbes is a professor of rhetoric. Maybe she will convince you to read.

EVELYN BENCE is a frequent contributor to *Priscilla Papers* and author of *Prayers for Girlfriends and Sisters and Me* (Servant Vine 1999).

Originally published in [*Priscilla Papers*, Volume 16, Number 1 Winter 2002, pp. 20-21.](#)