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The Beecher Sisters (Book Review)

R. Bryan Bademan
Sacred Heart University

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Recommended Citation
The Beechers were one of the nineteenth century’s most public and influential families, and this collective biography of Catharine (1800-78), Harriet (1811-96), and Isabella (1822-1907) does fine justice to these prominent women. White gives considerable attention to Isabella, often overlooked in the long shadows of her two more widely known sisters, but important in her own right for her contribution to the emerging women’s rights movement. The sisters are, in fact, an odd grouping—united by a general feminism and family ties, but quite divergent in disposition and principles. Catharine the educator never married, though she was also the most conservative of the three on most issues (and the oldest). Isabella was by far the most radical on the question of women’s rights, though she was fairly conservative temperamentally and thus did not allow her views to be widely known until the later decades of the century. Harriet fell in between her sisters on both accounts, more even keeled in personality and moderate on social questions. White skillfully addresses these and other subjects—the water cure, spiritualism, Victoria Woodhull—in biographical narrative that plays up family competitions between ambitious siblings. White’s characterization of New England Calvinism is less illuminating. The second sentence in the opening chapter anachronistically has Lyman Beecher a “Puritan minister,” and she takes later liberal Protestant critiques of Calvinism at face value and characterizes the earlier faith as hopelessly crippled by predestinarianism. While White is careful to honor Lyman’s children’s fond and joyful memories of their youth, even family theological discussions, in general she flattens the religious dimensions of the transformation of the Beechers over the course of the nineteenth century.

R. Bryan Bademan
Sacred Heart University