

*Faith on Trial: Mary Baker Eddy, Christian Science, and the First Amendment.* Peter A. Wallner. (Concord, N.H.: Plaidswede Publishing, 2014. pp. xi, 340, illustrations, notes, index, \$29.95.)

Peter Wallner, former director of the New Hampshire Historical Society library, has given readers a beautifully crafted book about an important New Hampshire legal event. Although he is not the first to write about this attempt to take control of a wealthy New Hampshire woman's assets on behalf of her near relatives or "next friends," this is a book that needed to be written. In *Faith on Trial*, Wallner adds a large amount of detailed information about the words and activities of those who brought the suit and of the lawyers who successfully defended against it. Most importantly, he draws from his research insightful conclusions about the motives involved in bringing the suit. The book, recounting the resulting battle, is easy to read and hard to put down.

When the suit finally came to trial, the judge and experts who examined Mary Baker Eddy, then in her eighties, found her to be thoroughly competent. Whether or not readers know this conclusion ahead of time, they will be immediately drawn into Wallner's description of the people who expended so much time, effort, and money trying to prove otherwise. Their motives were varied: to sell newspapers, to get more of her estate than her will provided, to damage a popular religious movement, to discredit Eddy's unusual religious ideas, and to punish a woman who had stepped out of her accepted place in society. Wallner portrays those who exhibited these motives as real people with understandable, though not always commendable, reasons for what they said and did.

Center stage in Wallner's story is lawyer William Eaton Chandler, a New Hampshire native and progressive politician who organized and led the attempt to take control of Eddy's property. Searching for a source of Chandler's enthusiasm for the suit, Wallner quotes him as writing, "The immortality which I have faith in is to be a physical life." Wallner then makes the case that, for Chandler, the suit was an attempt to stir public opposition to Eddy's faith in an ultimate spiritual existence and to her conviction of the mental nature of what Chandler called physical life.

Just as exposés by Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell led to reform of the meatpacking industry and Standard Oil, Chandler hoped that his efforts would lead the public to rise up and put an end to Christian Science and its anti-materialist teachings. According to Wallner, Chandler missed a key difference between meatpacking and religion: Eddy's unusual views were of little consequence to

most Americans who naturally valued individual freedom as long as it did not impact them negatively. At the same time, Wallner sees in Chandler a secondary but genuine concern for the family of Eddy's natural son George, a man who spent himself broke on failed mining ventures and almost continuous litigation every time his mother gave him money.

In order to paint a picture of Eddy, her staff, and her church organization as they struggled to survive the "next friends" ordeal, Wallner not only consulted original material but also made good use of biographies to sort through the friendly and unfriendly writings about Eddy at the time and since.

On a few points, Wallner could have been a little clearer. Viewing human experience as entirely mental, Eddy eventually came to see good and evil as mental too. This occurred to her when one of her early students began to exercise hypnotic control over his female patients, in part by rubbing their heads. Wallner says that rubbing was a practice Eddy opposed. It is worth noting, however, that she saw rubbing as harmless until this student demonstrated its connection with hypnotism and showed hypnotism to be something that could be used to do harm. In another place, Wallner reports a claim that Eddy asked her staff to pray for the death of the "next friends." He could have made it clearer that the only evidence for this claim was the accusation of a mentally unbalanced woman who was about to throw herself out of a hotel window.

At the end, *Faith on Trial* describes in fascinating detail how the lawyers defending Eddy skillfully won their case, in part by convincing the court that the suit equated Eddy's religious ideas with fiscal incompetency. Greed, sensationalism, religious competition, and the subjugation of women all fueled the phenomenon of the "next friends" suit. At its core though was Eddy's challenge to basic human assumptions about life, evil, and the universe. As philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once pointed out, when someone challenges our most deeply held assumptions, we do not call that person wrong. We call him crazy.

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