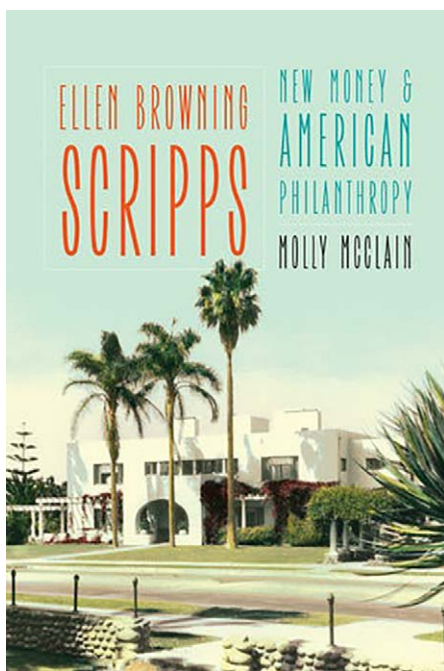


ELLEN BROWNING SCRIPPS: *New Money and American Philanthropy*. By Molly McClain. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019, 366 pp., \$24.95 paper). Reviewed by Keith Plummers.

It is impossible to spend time in San Diego today without encountering the fingerprints of Ellen Browning Scripps. Scripps was hardly the only newspaper publisher to exert a profound influence shaping California during a period of exponential growth in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but, as Molly McClain argues in this vivid biography, Scripps stood apart from contemporaries like Harry Chandler or William Randolph Hearst for her progressive philanthropic vision and charted a unique path as “a woman who did not fit into any known classification scheme” (xviii).



McClain’s is the first book-length study of Scripps since Charles Preece’s *Edward Willis and Ellen Browning Scripps: An Unmatched Pair* (BookCrafters, 1990) and the only work to focus solely on Scripps since the 1960s. Revisiting her life, McClain argues, is essential not only to understand histories of California, women and gender, and charity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries but also for the present as we navigate a period increasingly defined in both popular and scholarly writing as a New Gilded Age. She claims Scripps was a “capitalist with a conscience” (xxi) whose ideas about wealth and philanthropic practices might provide inspiration for “both billionaires and those still seeking the American Dream” (xxiii).

McClain’s rich and intimate portrait of Scripps is grounded in exhaustive archival research on Ellen’s personal papers and those of the Scripps family. This approach reveals the sharp wit, deep intellect, and organizational zeal of a woman who found publicity “distasteful” and “burdensome” and consistently publicly downplayed her foundational role in philanthropic projects and in the Scripps media enterprise (204). Throughout the book, McClain deftly weaves in Scripps’ less-guarded thoughts from private correspondence, her diary, or speeches to the La Jolla Women’s Club to reveal a complex character and not merely a “kind and darling” person, as a contemporary described her (119).

The tensions between public perception and private life drive one of the book’s key analytic contributions. McClain argues that Scripps had a complicated relationship with Victorian womanhood and its ideals of “patience, piety, and submission” (xviii). Even as Scripps had experiences—rigorous formal education and

independent finances—that were atypical, she held values “characteristic of many women her own age” (xviii) and spent much of her life playing “her role as the dutiful Victorian sister” (21) caring for her siblings and their children even while working and sacrificing her own professional activities to do so. Even as she approached sixty years old, independently wealthy and accomplished as a journalist and publisher, Scripps struggled with the decision to embrace independent living outside of a patriarchal household. For McClain, Scripps’s purchase of her own dwelling, South Molton Villa in La Jolla, was the critical development through which “she began to recognize her own power” (40). The house became a site for her vigorous civic, philanthropic, social, and political actions.

At the same time, this did not mean a radical break with many of the values and commitments that had guided her previously. McClain writes that Scripps “defined herself as a progressive woman with socialist sympathies” (95). In 1908, Ellen wrote favorably about Socialist Party candidate Eugene Debs after hearing him speak. In the following years, she dedicated herself to the ultimately successful campaign for women’s suffrage in California in 1911, organizing the Scripps papers to champion the cause. Yet, as McClain notes, she had become a committed Republican and abolitionist in college in the 1850s, had been a member of the National Women’s Suffrage Association in 1873, and had advocated for suffrage while at the *Detroit Evening News*. The philanthropic work she undertook, while often reflecting her deep commitments to science as a progressive endeavor, temperance, women’s education, and the creation of public amenities for all San Diegans, nonetheless included actions reflecting the Victorian ideals—such as piety—instilled in her youth. As McClain pithily notes, “For someone who had shed her religious upbringing, she did a good deal for the Episcopal Church” (121). Scripps envisioned a new world for women—writing that it “is so good to find women ‘doing things’ instead of spending their time in cooking dainties and embroidering underwear” (198)—and consistently took actions to usher it in, but in many ways seemed to see herself as an ancestor to it bound up with the old ways. One of McClain’s great strengths is her ability to capture Scripps’s embodiment of the radical and traditional while still charting her changes over time.

Scripps’s actions and beliefs, in combination with her significant wealth, make her a unique figure who defies easy characterization. Nonetheless, McClain endeavors to set her into context and does so most successfully when describing La Jolla. McClain sets Scripps’s personal evolution alongside the area’s development from “little more than a summer campground” (39) to “a suburb with electricity, paved roads, and automobiles” (181). She paints an evocative portrait of the changing physical geography and captures the rich social fabric that Scripps was essential in weaving. The social institutions that made La Jolla “a woman’s town” (44) in the late-nineteenth century, particularly the La Jolla Women’s Club, are essential to understanding Scripps’s actions and thinking. The Club served as a venue to meet the leaders of projects that she would later fund but also as a space to present, debate, and develop ideas that would guide her actions. Although the size of her fortune, the extent of her philanthropy, and her ability to influence public debates

through the Scripps newspapers made Ellen unique, the essential role of the Women's Club was an experience shared with many other women at this period.

Ellen Scripps was an unparalleled figure, and McClain's biography gives her life the thorough and nuanced treatment it deserves. In doing so, it invites questions that will hopefully fuel further research. For example, McClain invokes feminism in the title of Chapter 8 ("A Feminist Speaks Out") but otherwise avoids explicit use of the term. How might Scripps's life change a history of feminism, particularly at our present moment as celebrities and CEOs have embraced it? McClain shows that Scripps possessed a rich sense of nature that informed her reading, art collecting, and philanthropic activities. How might a focus on Scripps and San Diego change narratives of preservation and environmentalism that often focus on men like John Muir and San Francisco and the Sierras? McClain has provided a compelling portrait of a fascinating life that should prompt these and other questions and provide an essential example to address them.

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