

*Mary Baker Eddy*, by Gillian Gill

reviewed by [Steven Gottschalk](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

While factually rigorous, Gillian Gill's biography of Mary Baker Eddy is engaging and well paced. Gill writes with unusual directness about the difficulties of coming to grips with a life of such drama, passion and complexity as that of the founder of Christian Science. Even the book's appendices are lively, including an account of Gill's troubled dealings with Mother Church officials over archival-access policy, and sharply drawn sketches of previous Eddy biographers.

This is much to the point, since the controversies Eddy engendered as a woman religious leader spawned two biographical tradition: hagiography on the one hand and vitriolic attack on the other. Robert Peel's sympathetic but critically informed trilogy on Eddy was the first to break free of these alternatives. Gill, who is not a Christian Scientist, avoids them as well.

She builds in part on Peel's still-essential account, though disagreeing with him on some points. But she also makes significant contributions of her own, particularly through a sensitive and acute reading of the sources on the first half of Eddy's long life. Gill, who also wrote a biography of Agatha Christie, knows how to follow a trail of evidence. She definitively explodes some of the myths that have dogged Eddy for decades--for example, that she was a lifelong hysteric or that she ruthlessly eliminated perceived rivals for power in her church.

In the process Gill opens anew the question of who Eddy really was. Gill's feminism works for her in exploring an important dimension of Eddy's complexity. Though she does some male-bashing of early Mother Church officials, going speculatively beyond the evidence, she has new and revealing things to say about the emotional texture of Eddy's life. While Eddy was not a feminist, she acted largely outside feminine gender roles, with consequences that Gill explores with a combination of passion and detail. Her book, published as part of the Radcliffe Biography Series, is the first to demonstrate why and how Eddy played a "unique part," as Gill puts it, "in the movement toward a woman-inclusive theology and church governance."

Yet some readers may balk, as I did, at the self-imposed limits within which Gill works. She writes from a largely secular standpoint and refrains from plunging very deeply into the religious wellsprings of Eddy's motivation and character. This is not to say that she is dismissive of Eddy's thought. Gill usefully exposes the male bias that has so strongly shaped the discussion of Eddy's relation with Phineas Quimby, a mental healer who influenced her before her work on Christian Science began--particularly the assumption that Eddy must have derived the substance of her thinking from a man. And she takes full measure of the originality of Eddy's book *Science and Health*.

During the first half of her life Eddy's spiritual search was impelled by what she called, in Augustinian accents, "a hunger and thirst after divine things." The second half of her life was dominated by the conviction that her "discovery" illumined the gospel in a way that could prove pivotal for the future of Christianity. Gill knows Eddy too well to deny the primacy of religion in her life. But she does not take it sufficiently into account in explaining Eddy's day-to-day motivation and conduct. Nor does she engage effectively with Eddy's own controversial engagement with the problem of sin and radical evil in human experience--specifically Eddy's claim that mentally projected malice, if spiritually unresisted, can produce destructive effects.

Even with these reservations, Gill's book is the most useful one-volume Eddy biography now available, and the most important addition to the literature on Christian Science in 20 years. By blasting myths, correcting much in the factual record of Eddy's life, and portraying her as a real woman with real feelings, Gill has taken Eddy biography a big step forward--even as the missing religious dimension in her book illustrates the need for further steps.