

Challenge and Change: The Travails and Joys of a Complex Woman

Allen Hern

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The intrafamily biography Challenge and Change praises a Christian woman whose wisdom and courage saw her through massive social and historical changes.

Drawing from forty journals kept over a lifetime, Allen Hern's biography of his cousin, Reba, recalls her challenges and adventures against the backdrop of twentieth century changes.

Reba Hern was born in 1909 in Ontario. She was raised in a conservative Christian home and grew up to be a woman who was ahead of her time. The second woman to be ordained a minister in the United Church of Canada, she also spent five years in a Catholic convent, worked with the Catholic Children's Aid Society, and moved to Nassau to teach religion courses. In her retirement, she became a world traveler, too.

With the help of Reba's journals and incorporating the recollections of her family, friends, and colleagues, Hern's book makes Reba a witness to changes within Christianity and to women's social roles, in and outside of churches. It highlights historical tumult, too, as with the end of British colonialism in the Bahamas, which made a trial-and-error transition to governance by the population, rather than by outsiders. In such environments: Reba found her place—as a misfit.

Poignant accounts of Reba's struggles, many of which were church-related, fill the book. These include her impression that churches were "as dead as the boards and cement they are made of." Still, she sought a relationship with God. And although she was strong, independent, and accustomed to living on her own, she yearned for a home and a husband. Looking outside of herself, she also expressed shock at the economic disparities between rich and poor people; about racism and white privilege; and about the injustice of colonial policies in the Bahamas.

Conversational in tone, the book strikes a balance between being entertaining and informative, mixing historical trivia with colorful quotes from Reba's journals. Where hard facts are missing, Hern's own reflections are used to fill in the gaps; he interjects his thoughts on religious and church-related topics, so that the book is both informed by Reba's perspectives and by Hern's own work as a Christian minister. Personal photographs flesh out Hern's complimentary picture of Reba further. However, the book's inclusion of outdated terms in some places clashes with its more updated terminology elsewhere, and there are distracting spelling and grammatical errors present in the text.

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KRISTINE MORRIS (June 16, 2022)

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