

### Crisis Of The Antebellum Spirit: Southern Sisters' Diaries Reflect Conversion, Then Despair

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## Review

### CRISIS OF THE ANTEBELLUM SPIRIT

#### Southern sisters' diaries reflect conversion, then despair

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**Speer, Allen Paul** *Sisters of Providence*. Overmountain Press, 2000-12-01. ISBN 1570721580

Despite the flurry of Civil War diaries, memoirs, and family histories, the average 19th century American woman is often overlooked in the general conversation among historians. In **Sisters of Providence**, editors Allen Paul and Janet Barton Speer detail the story of two sisters, Nancy Jane (Jennie) and Anne Melissa (Ann) Speer. The editors invite us to take a close look at two articulate daughters of a North Carolina yeoman farmer. The young women did not suffer the pain and the heartbreak that is associated with the Civil War "but rather suffered a thoroughly debilitating crisis of the spirit."

The editors evenly divide the book into four chapters. In Chapter 1, "Jennie" tracks her Christian conversion and Christ's influence in her life. She struggles with issues of holiness, identifying God's purpose for her life, and her commitment to do right in a wicked world. While Jennie constantly reflects on her own salvation and her relationship with Christ, she, like so many 19th century mainstream Methodists, experienced anxiety over her own place in eternity. Jennie grasps the liberating assurance that she was put on earth and saved by divine mandate, leaving her with the conviction that she must fulfill God's will for her life or possibly suffer eternal damnation.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the editors delineate the personalities of the two young women, detailing the complex interplay of God, philosophy, theology, faith, education, family, and nature. The details reveal the gripping thoughts and complexities of life in 19th-century America. In the Speers' telling, the sisters emerge as women of talent who spent much of their formative teenage years writing and reflecting.

As opposed to the broad considerations of the earlier chapters, the final chapter entitled "Providence" focuses on the sisters' last years. The prevailing theme is despair, induced by their 25-year-old brother Aaron's death, Jennie's bereavement and failing health, and Ann's attempts at consoling her older sibling.

The abundant writings from the women's personal diaries, as well as the editorial comments, are both a strength and a weakness of the book. Certainly specialists on antebellum America or on 19th century American women will appreciate gaining access to these seldom-heard voices. Yet the average reader might opt out for a smooth narrative rather than reading through these entries. Moreover, this reviewer found Jennie's Christian walk fraught with difficulties that are removed from those experienced by many evangelicals today.

This is an informative book, sober and quite grim, in which the arrangement of material is logical and sequential. The diary passages share the concerns of two backcountry sisters and the editors provide some additional social history, even if **Sisters of Providence** contributes little commentary in regard to the dynamic movements of the 19th century.

*Jeffery B. Cook is chair and assistant professor of history at Nyack College. A contributor to the West Virginia Encyclopedia and West Virginia History, he currently is at work on a documentary history of the United States and a biography of Bourbon Democrat Aretas Brooks Fleming.*