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Review

'MY LOVE FOR YOU IS MY RULING PASSION'

Letters capture wartime struggles of young Texas couple

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Johansson, M. Jane, Perry, Harriet, and Perry, Theophilus. *Widows by the Thousand: The Civil War Correspondence of Theophilus and Harriet Perry, 1862-1864.* University of Arkansas Press, 2000-10-01. ISBN 1557286213

In May 1862, Theophilus Perry, an attorney in Marshall, Texas, reluctantly left his wife and baby daughter to enlist as an officer in the 28th Texas Cavalry. For the next two years, the Perrys endured a relentless string of tragedies. Not long after the death of their daughter in 1863, Harriet received the news that two of her brothers had been killed in battle. During this time, Theophilus, too, lost members of his extended family, and ultimately perished himself from a wound received at Pleasant Hill in April 1864.

Editor M. Jane Johansson, historian and author of *Peculiar Honor: A History of the 28th Cavalry, 1862-1865*, explains that part of what makes the publication of this correspondence so important is its rarity. Not only have few letter collections of married couples of the Confederacy been published, but those of couples living in the westernmost regions of the Trans-Mississippi Theater are scarcer still.

Though **Widows by the Thousand** is valuable to scholars for its details about Confederate camp life and the isolated east Texas home front (including its daily life, agriculture, slavery, and sex roles), the Perrys' correspondence is most noteworthy for its abundant revelations about their emotional lives. In intimate language, Harriet and Theophilus elaborate on their love for one another, the agony of their separation, their battles with grief and depression, and their determination to cling to their religious faith. Striking, too, is the evidence of how they used letter writing-their only contact-to sustain their bond.

Harriet's frank discussion of sexuality and reproduction, topics mid-19th century female correspondents rarely address, are remarkable for this era. With candor, she complains of the pain of breastfeeding and post-partum piles, and proudly records her second child's demands for her breast. She conveys her terror at approaching childbirth and prepares Theophilus for her death. And, in several letters to Theophilus, she asserts her expectation that she will be spared the birth of more children, declaring that they both must take care that she bear no further offspring.

Theophilus, a hard-headed realist, harbors no illusions about the future of the South after the war, and is convinced that he must prepare his family for the South's economic collapse. During the first year of their separation, he instructs Harriet to pay off all their debts. Once accomplished, he becomes obsessed with buying a small farm where they can begin anew after the war. Their exchanges about money and land reveal how the war has shifted the power balance in their relationship. In her husband's absence, Harriet assumes progressively more of the decision-making responsibilities. Though she dutifully inquires about land as her husband bids her, in ensuing letters she persuades him that the lack of acreage and skyrocketing prices render his plan unwise. In an about-face, he relents, writing, "You have acted right in not buying land. I approve your judgement." A year after Theophilus's death, Harriet returned to live with her family in North Carolina, where she remained until her death in 1885.

Johansson's editing is meticulous, if not obsessively so. The volume's organization into chapters, each preceded by a topical introduction, makes for easy reading and reference. The correspondence is followed by a brief epilogue, 56 pages of notes, a bibliography, and an index. **Widows by the Thousand** is an important addition to the literature documenting family life in the Civil War era.

Judith E. Harper (jeharper@ziplink.net) specializes in 19th century American women's history. The author of Susan B. Anthony: A Biographical Companion (1998), she is currently writing an encyclopedia of women during the Civil War to be published by Routledge.