

The 'Unwritten War' No Longer: Alice Fahs Explores Popular Literature Of The Civil War

Bonnie L. Bates

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Bates, Bonnie L. (2001) "The 'Unwritten War' No Longer: Alice Fahs Explores Popular Literature Of The Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol3/iss2/30>

Interview

THE 'UNWRITTEN WAR' NO LONGER: ALICE FAHS EXPLORES POPULAR LITERATURE OF THE CIVIL WAR

Bates, Bonnie L.

Spring 2001

Civil War Book Review (cwbr): In The Imagined Civil War, you note that popular literature during this time was "part of a shared culture." Why does it have resonance in the literary world today?

Alice Fahs (af): Popular literature can offer a wider, more comprehensive sense of the character of any era. Sometimes the insights we can gain from popular literature simply aren't available from more "highbrow" literature. For instance, black characters and white women characters appeared prominently in popular wartime literature, but much less frequently in war literature by the canonical authors we've all studied in school, such as Herman Melville or Stephen Crane.

One of the real surprises for me in doing research for this book was finding such a vast amount of wartime popular literature. The sheer number of sources, especially in the North, was stunning, including everything from sensational novels to children's stories. Our literary world today, with its own outpouring of popular literature, is not so different from the literary marketplace during the war.

cwbr: You characterize much of the popular literature of the era as "sentimental." Why did 19th century contemporaries find this quality so appealing?

af: Sentimentalism was a mode of thought and way of being that was central to mid-19th century identity. It primarily stressed the importance of emotion in an individual's life, valuing "heart" over "head," and was closely linked to the rise of evangelicalism as well as a new culture of sensibility in the antebellum era.

During the war, literary sentimentalism became an important mode of coping with unprecedented mass slaughter; sentimental stories and poems stressed the importance of soldiers' individual sacrifices and provided deathbed scenes in which dying soldiers transformed the lives of those around them. Sentimental popular literature tried to compensate for the unbearable loss of so many men.

cwbr: Do you think feminized war literature (that is, literature that stressed the roles women could play in the war effort) had an overall positive or negative effect on women's attitudes toward the war? Did it have lasting effects on literature once the war was over?

af: It's hard to determine how popular literature directly shaped women's attitudes toward the war because little historical evidence exists of their reactions to such literature. Yet a strong indication of the influence of such literature lies in the sheer volume of it. In the last years of battle, for instance, hundreds of war romances were published in major magazines and weeklies such as *Harper's Weekly*. One reason for its popularity was that feminized war literature, like sentimental literature of dying soldiers, attempted to compensate for women's losses in the war. Over and over, such literature made women's own suffering the centerpiece of stories, and attempted to give it meaning within a larger patriotic and religious framework.

Unfortunately, the roles that women assumed within Civil War popular literature were forgotten in the postwar landscape. During the war itself, women played major roles in sensational novels as spies, crossdressing soldiers, and brave defenders of hearth and home. In more conventional fiction they were also center stage as nurses or as domestic heroines. By the end of the 19th century, however, most fiction about the war centered around the heroism of white soldiers on both sides, despite the efforts of such prominent war workers as Mary Livermore to keep the memory of women's contributions to the war alive. We've really only begun to undo this masculinization of the memory of the war in histories that recover the place of women both in the war effort and in war writings.

cwbr: You mention that few Southerners read southern literary periodicals during the war, turning instead to imported ones from the North, such as Harper's and the New York Ledger. What explains this phenomenon?

af: At the beginning of the war, many Southerners had high hopes that they would create a new Confederate literary culture entirely separate from that of the North. Commentators urged their compatriots not to read that "trashy" Yankee literature, but instead to read new Confederate literature as an act of patriotism. Once the northern mails stopped, Southerners couldn't receive northern literature anyway (except when it was smuggled through the lines). So it seemed to many writers and publishers that a glorious opportunity had come. Several enterprising publishers did manage to seize the day, producing weeklies in a deliberate attempt to rival such popular magazines as *Harper's*. But they quickly ran into insuperable problems: not only did shortages of supplies make it difficult to produce magazines, but the war itself was enormously disruptive to the infrastructure, a problem that only grew worse. In addition, northern literary culture was more developed and polished, with many more professional writers. As numerous diaries reveal, Southerners began to miss the literature they had grown accustomed to before the war.

cwbr: *Northern and southern popular literature dealt with racial issues in very different ways. How do you think this affected society's attitudes toward the newly freed slaves? Did popular literature end up altering societal views about blacks or did it merely reflect those attitudes already present in Civil War culture?*

af: The relationship of literature to social change is quite complicated, and I wouldn't argue that literature by itself was capable of substantially altering views about blacks. But I do think that as enormous social changes began to occur as a result of the war, especially as slaves freed themselves by coming into Union lines, northern popular literature reflected such changes in ways that, in turn, began to shift a larger conversation about race within northern culture. Major periodicals such as *Frank Leslie's* began the war portraying blacks in grotesque, exaggerated cartoons, but by the end of the war included images of manly blacks drawn from photographs. The publication of images of black soldiers, especially, created new cultural conditions for imagining the role of blacks within American life. Southern wartime literature had a very different agenda: rather than celebrating black soldiers, it worked hard to deny that black men were capable of being soldiers, instead portraying them as childish buffoons in need of white paternalism. As for the legacy of such images, it's clear that black authors such as William Wells Brown later took sustenance from wartime depictions of black soldiers. But he and other black authors fought an uphill battle after the war in an

increasingly racist climate in which black participation in the war was minimized or even denied.

cwbr: You mention that the railroad and telegraph increased the speed of war-era communication. How did this new technology affect popular literature?

af: Early in the war, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote a wonderful essay about how modern the conflict seemed to him. He and countless other Americans expected to get news from the front not just once a day, as in the past, but several times a day as events from the battlefield were relayed by telegraph and then printed in "extras" pinned on bulletin boards outside newspaper offices. The intense interest in the war, especially in the North, meant that it was profitable for publishers to produce massive quantities of popular war literature, often in almost immediate response to significant events. That expectation of instantaneity marked the Civil War as different from past wars, and increased the public appetite for popular literature. In the South, the comparative lack of technology meant that publishers were unable to satisfy that same interest in the war.

cwbr: Do you see anything in modern literature that is analogous to Civil War popular literature?

af: There are many similarities between modern and 19th century war literature: popular literature has often been ostentatiously patriotic, with clear propagandistic aims. On the other hand, there have been real changes in the ways in which women, say, have been portrayed in such literature. During the Civil War, mothers were portrayed in popular literature in almost sacred terms. But during World War II it was the pinup girl who was used to evoke home instead. And as one wonderful audience member pointed out after a talk I gave last year, during Vietnam, "mother" was invoked more as an obscenity than as a cherished ideal. The demands of war, including the need for an absolutely unified home front, produce similarities in war literature, but the changing cultural landscape means differences crop up as well.

cwbr: Why do you think this type of literature has been so long ignored in modern scholarship?

af: For many years popular literature was dismissed as "low" literature of little interest; people instead read canonical Civil War writers, and critics bemoaned the fact that no great masterpieces had ever resulted from the war. But the recent rise of interest in popular culture of all kinds has opened doors to analysis of Civil War popular culture as well. As a historian, I find Civil War popular literature important as part of the larger context within which the war was fought. Such literature was part of the war, not separate from it: it was read by men and women on the home front, by soldiers in their tents at the battle front, by travelers on railroad cars, by children both Northern and Southern. It formed part of the fabric of people's lives during the war.

Alice Fahs, associate professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, has focused her lens on the popular literature of the Civil War, creating a cultural study of a topic rarely treated by historians. Her new book, The Imagined Civil War, defines Civil War popular literature as print material intended for a broad reading public, including sensational war novels, humor, songs, poetry, and histories of the war. In this interview, she delves into the lasting effects of "low literature" on the American cultural landscape.