

The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895

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Recommended Citation

Roberts, Giselle (2004) "The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss2/17>

Review

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Spring 2004

Censer, Jane Turner *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895*. Louisiana State University Press, \$59.95 ISBN 807129070

Gendered assessment:

The postwar elite southern woman

For decades historians have debated the extent to which the Civil War became a watershed for elite southern women. An earlier generation of historians led by Anne Firor Scott argued that the war provided a springboard from which women leaped into a world heretofore reserved for men. Recent scholarship has revised this interpretation and suggests that the wartime experiences of elite southern women led them to cling to the pre-existing race and class hierarchy as they looked for ways to assert their status in a world without wealth or slaves. For all this lively debate, there has been no definitive study of postwar womanhood - until now. Drawing upon the diaries, letters, memoirs, and published writings of elite women in North Carolina and Virginia, Jane Turner Censer tells the story of nondependent women who tried their hands at new activities and individually could count many triumphs.

The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood provides a thorough overview of the historiography while also advancing a new perspective on the post-war experiences of elite women. Challenging the theory that women invented new selves designed to resist change rather than embrace it, Censer follows Scott's pioneering analysis to argue that women incorporated the notion of nondependence into their family, household and community relationships. Valuing self-reliance and female capability above the romantic appeal of the belle ideal was necessarily born out of Civil War and Confederate defeat. In 1861, these privileged women held high hopes for their new nation, yet the four years that followed brought only heartache and hardship. Many lost their husbands, fathers, brothers, or sons to the bloody battlefield. Others lost their homes and possessions in the wake of Federal occupation. In defeat, all elite

women were robbed of the lifestyle slavery had afforded them. Clad in patched dresses and palmetto hats, southern ladies in 1865 could scarcely believe the emotional and physical cost of the war effort. The war forced women of all ages to redefine their place in society, not by subordinating themselves to men, but by expanding their contribution in both the domestic realm and the workforce. In their diaries, letters, and fictional works, elite women increasingly viewed education as a functional not ornamental pursuit, became bolder about traveling with escorts or performing in theatricals and tableaux, and grew skeptical of the idea that marriage would somehow better a woman's lot in life.

One of the great strengths of Censer's book is her use of age as a way to uncover the varied experiences of women in the New South. While historians have often defined women according to their race, class and gender, they have until recently failed to draw upon age as a category of analysis. Age, however, had a powerful impact on elite women's understanding and experience of war, and ultimately shaped the ways in which they confronted the changed social landscape in the post war period. Censer aptly notes that perhaps the theoretical differences between Scott and her critics are an outcome of the different age groups they have examined. Dividing elite women into three groups—those born before 1820, those born between 1820-49, and those born between 1850-69—Censer argues that the women of the younger generations fully embraced the new ideal of the self-reliant, capable woman, while the older generation struggled to adapt to the changed postbellum world.

Contending that women's reconstruction took place both within and without, Censer looks through a generational lens to explore women as mistresses, property owners, teachers, and as writers and commentators on the South. While older women generally struggled with and often resisted change, younger women embraced the ideal of self-reliant, independent womanhood and employed it in every aspect of their lives. In the domestic realm, where household composition often included co-residence of adult siblings, or adult children and parents, older women found it difficult to adapt whereas their daughters were less concerned with keeping servants and more ready and able to complete the work themselves. Confirming Laura Edwards' insightful analysis, Censer notes that elite women began to judge themselves by the surroundings they created, and increasingly turned to appliances to replace the black labor they had lost. In regard to property ownership, these young self-reliant women were more likely than ever before to receive inherited property of their own as families showed a greater acceptance of the unmarried state by granting a

modicum of independence to those who had traditionally been most dependent. Rejecting the isolated, poverty-stricken plantation lifestyle, many women of the younger generations refused to operate the agricultural enterprises engaged in by their elders, preferring instead to sell their holdings to partake in the rich cultural and intellectual life of the larger towns and cities.

Censer then shifts the focus from the domestic world to the paid workforce. In a fascinating chapter on teaching, she provides a comprehensive analysis of the entry-level governess, the home-school teacher, and the private and public school teacher, noting that older generation teachers were more likely to work in private academies while young teachers dominated the public school system. Disputing the theory that poverty drove women into the classroom, but the classroom could not lift them out of poverty, Censer argues that long-term teachers were adept in negotiating better pay and conditions, and carved out a place for themselves in the education system while embodying the new ethic that praised economic self-support and independence among women. As writers, young women were far more successful than older women, envisioning a life of letters marked by influence, intelligence and fame. Writing under their own names, women abandoned the frothy romance novel to experiment with adventure, naturalism and regionalism, and in particular, explored the deficiencies they saw in the South and in southern men. Women's entry into the field of paid employment, and their new understanding of their role as women, Censer argues, mirrored what was happening in the North and elsewhere in the world. In the 1890s, however, challenges to privileged women working for pay increasingly arose as prosperity returned to the South and Lost Cause mythology promoted the reemergence of the celebrated belle ideal.

Jane Turner Censer has produced a study that combines a review of historiography with her own interesting analysis. The book's main weakness lies not so much in its content, but in its structure. The chapters in the book are relatively long and would have benefited considerably from the use of sub-headings. Without them the book appears disjointed in some parts, as she skips, for example, from household composition to altered relationships between elite women and servants. The chapter on teaching and benevolence could have been split in two. Structural issues aside, the other major problem relates to Censer's treatment of the Civil War. While her book commences after the conflict, the shadow of the war looms large over the post-war period. Only addressing the war on a few brief occasions, Censer downplays its importance in reconfiguring the lives of elite women of all ages. Young women, for example,

assumed a greater role in the household during the war and began to think about their lives very differently as a result of losing male kin, homes, possessions, and slaves. A greater engagement with the transformation and change that occurred during the war may have further strengthened her argument for the independent ideal - which had its roots in the wartime landscape. Nevertheless, Jane Turner Censer has produced a fascinating study that will become a standard text on elite southern womanhood.

Giselle Roberts is a Research Associate in American History at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of The Confederate Belle (University of Missouri Press, 2003) and the editor of The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson (University of Georgia Press and the Southern Texts Society, forthcoming Spring 2004). She may be reached at Giselleroberts@yahoo.com.au.