

Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937

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Review

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Shaping post-war identity

Women writers and Civil War memory

In recent months, historians have offered some fresh and exciting perspectives on the lives of women in the 19th-century South. Jane Censer's portrait of "nondependent" postwar women and Karen Cox's examination of the United Daughters of the Confederacy are just two examples of this new wave of historiography that has shifted the focus from the household to explore women's contribution to politics, benevolence, and the paid workforce. In her first book, **Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937**, Sarah E. Gardner draws upon diaries, letters, memoirs, biographies, histories and novels to argue that white women fashioned a new cultural identity for the postbellum South by telling and retelling stories about the Civil War. Her examination of the effect of the war on women's literary lives reminds us that they were active participants in the making of a New South founded on a Confederate tradition.

Gardner begins her analysis during the Civil War, when thousands of women took up their pens in an effort to understand the tumultuous world around them. Diarists turned the family oriented focus of their journals outward to chronicle battles, shortages, rumors, and the death of loved ones and friends. Together with private correspondence, these genres provided women with a means to reflect on the state of the war effort, to despair over military defeats, and to question the competency of their politicians, generals and soldiers. Women such as Mary Loughborough and Rose O'Neal Greenhow published eyewitness accounts during the war, while domestic novelists produced political fiction and emerged as "propagandists, fighting for their civilization. Gardner

notes that while wartime narratives addressed the same themes as postwar works, they remained unburdened by "the pervading sense of Confederate defeat" that dominated later accounts.

Gardner then shifts her focus to the ways in which postbellum women retold their stories about the war "in an effort to explain and vindicate southern defeat." Her examination of the creation and recreation of these stories is the great strength of this book. Dividing her analysis into five periods—1865-1877, 1877-1895, 1895-1905, 1905-1915, 1916-1936—Gardner documents the evolution of Lost Cause myth from an individual, and later, collective southern narrative, to a nationally accepted story. While women initially rejected writing history, they embraced fiction to tell their stories of war. In the immediate postwar period, women's writings were dominated by an overwhelming sense of defeat and an uncertainty about the future. An end to political reconstruction in the South infused a sense of hope and optimism into women's writings about the war. Gardner notes that while northern novelists emphasized romance and reunion through intersectional marriage between the Federal soldier and belle, southern women writers chose instead to glorify the Confederacy and celebrate a "reinvigorated South" where the belle married a "determined, healthy, politically viable Confederate veteran." In these accounts, the South was not subsumed into a dominant northern culture through reunion but instead honored for its "distinctiveness and superiority.

The emergence of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) at the end of the nineteenth-century led to a move away from the imaginative realm as women published history, biography, and memoirs. Concurring with Cox, Gardner argues that in promoting a "true story of the war," the UDC was successful in shaping a collective southern narrative of the conflict. The organization - boasting a membership of more than 40,000 members in 1905 - compelled women to tell their personal stories and enthusiastically endorsed the publication of southern diaries and reminiscences. Local chapters shared their stories among members, and the UDC aided them in this pursuit by providing outlines for formatting papers and suggesting topics for inquiry. The result was a collective memory about the origins, meanings and results of the war where women were praised for their devotion and commitment, and even fallen heroes such as General James Longstreet were rehabilitated in an effort to "prop up the Lost Cause by placing more 'heroes' within its fold." By the early 1900s, Gardner notes, the southern interpretation of the war had gained national appeal. Women increasingly wrote historical sketches, but also published quasi-fictional

accounts and revised versions of their wartime diaries. While women "felt secure" that they had "authored a culturally sanctioned representation of the past," there were writers such as Mary Johnston and Mary Noailles Murfree who broke slightly with tradition to write novels about the wartime destruction of the southern landscape. This element was enhanced in works published during World War I, where the terrible nature of war often took precedence over Lost Cause rhetoric. Yet it was Margaret Mitchell who, according to Gardner, truly nationalized the southern story by offering a "nostalgic depiction of the Old South" without advocating its return.

The great strength of **Blood and Irony** is Gardner's analysis of the development of the Lost Cause myth, and she certainly succeeds in demonstrating how postwar reality informed interpretations of the past. Her focus on women's contribution to the creation of a new southern identity, and their active involvement in writing and publishing war stories throws up interesting questions about how women viewed themselves and their role in the postwar South. These questions contribute to the ongoing debate as to whether the Civil War was a watershed for southern women. While I realize this was not one of Gardner's aims in writing the book, I do believe that women's evolving dialogue about the war and their role in it has important ramifications for the watershed debate, and a greater engagement with this scholarship would have enhanced her argument. So too would an understanding of where these "southern white women writers" stood in relation to class. Were they elite women, middle class women, or poor white women? Were they from urban or rural areas? Did these factors influence the kinds of stories they chose to write about and the perspectives they adopted? A tighter definition in the introduction would have clarified these issues from the outset. Nevertheless, **Blood and Irony** is a welcome addition to a new body of scholarship that explores the important contribution that women made to the creation of a cultural identity in the postwar South.

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