

Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America

Frank R. Freemon

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Review

Freemon, Frank R.

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Schultz, Jane E. *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America.* University of North Carolina Press, \$37.50 ISBN 2003024944

Mothering the maimed

Women overcame wartime conditions to heal soldiers

One reads this book with mixed feelings. The reader appreciates the massive research in original sources. The author has determined the exact number of black and white female workers in individual hospitals of the Union and Confederate armies. The full story of these workers is laid out: where they came from, why they went to work in the hospitals, what happened to their families, who took care of their children, what they did in the hospitals, what other people thought about them, what they thought about each other, what happened to them later, how their lives were changed by their hospital experiences. What more could any reader ask for?

The author always maintains a modern viewpoint. The historical actors did not know how bacteria carried disease from one patient to another so their actions seem uncaring. With modern sensibilities, the author is unpleasantly surprised, even outraged, to discover the importance of class and race to the people of the Civil War generation. Upper class women sometimes looked down upon coworkers who came from a working or farming background. The author breathes fire when she describes how freed slaves were paid less than white women. One never sees the war through the eyes of the participants. The Southern women worried about invasion, death of loved ones, maimed soldiers returning home, hospitals filled with sick and wounded, smells of diarrhea and dead tissue. They hated the occupying army with a seething that transformed their beings. Northern women, better organized than their Southern sisters, shared the gore and smell of hospital work, but were motivated by a mystical belief in a unified nation that was destined to transform the world if it could survive the great trial created by a cabal of cruel Philistines. They worked to

serve what one Northern doctor called, at the end of his life, the greatest cause the Earth has known. These personal feelings are completely bypassed by modern eyes of the author.

This book is a valid description of an important aspect of America's Iliad, but it does not capture the drama of individual lives. Let me illustrate with the story of my favorite Civil War woman. Early in the war, the widow later known as Mother Bickerdyke, during the regular church service in Galesburg, Illinois, heard the testimony of a wounded soldier returned home. He said that the soldiers in his Illinois regiment longed for the fresh produce of their farms. The church loaded a wagon with farm produce and Bickerdyke volunteered to take it to the hospitals just behind the front. Aghast at the conditions she saw, she began a personal hospital clean-up campaign that never ended. She entered a hospital and immediately began barking orders and turning to work herself. She scrubbed the floors, carried the patients out into the sun, aired the bedding, changed the sheets, washed the utensils in the kitchen, and generally earned her nickname as the Calico Cyclone. The doctor in charge, seeing his male orderlies and nurses scrubbing the floors and walls, was amazed. His full bag of carrots and sticks had been unable to pry these enlisted men away from their card games for more than a few minutes. With a mixture of awe and anger, he demanded the source of her authority, describing his own as flowing down the chain of command from the surgeon general in Washington to the director of the hospitals in the region to the director of this hospital and then to him, in charge of this ward. She was not impressed with the chain of command. My authority comes from the Lord God Almighty. He took his complaint directly to General William Tecumseh Sherman, commander of all the troops in the region. Told that someone was challenging his doctor's authority, Sherman became incensed and told the doctor this person would be summarily sent North. But when told the miscreant was Mother Bickerdyke, Sherman's countenance changed. Sorry, doctor, but you are the one going North. She outranks me. The story of Mother Bickerdyke is fully covered in the present book, but broken up in different chapters. The author's immense primary research, for example, has discovered what happened to the children when the expected two week absence of their mother stretched out to four years. The book mentions that Bickerdyke was the only woman to accompany General Sherman in his famous March to the Sea that broke the back of the Confederacy but does not give us the background to understand why. Sherman probably knew that the only way to stop her was to shoot her.

This book uses immense original historical research to give a picture of women in Civil War hospitals from the viewpoint of a modern person with modern sensibilities. If you want knowledge, find it here. If you want the feelings of Civil War participants, you must look elsewhere.

Frank R. Freemon, M.D., is the author of Microbes and Minie Balls (1993), an annotated bibliography of Civil War medicine, and Gangrene and Glory (1998), the full story of northern versus southern medicine during the great American fratricide.