

Sanctified Trial: The Diary of Eliza Rhea Anderson Fain, a Confederate Woman in East Tennessee

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Review

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Fain, John N., Editor *Sanctified Trial: The Diary of Eliza Rhea Anderson Fain, a Confederate Woman in East Tennessee*. University of Tennessee Press, \$42.00 hardcover ISBN 1572333138

Unfailing faith

Christian introspection during turbulent times

John Fain presents to us in **Sanctified Trial**, the record of 57 years of the life of Eliza Rhea Anderson Fain, one of his distant relatives. The original diary comprised over 3,750 pages, of which the editor has chosen to present those sections which record material written between 1861-84: Fain's life before, during, and after the Civil War. The diary offers a new perspective. Fain was not, like Mary Chesnut, the mistress of a, or several, large plantations. Fain was of the wealthy, slave-holding merchant, small farmer, business class. The diary revisits, from that perspective, some familiar themes: the South as the place of good and the problem of the sexual alliances between masters and female slaves. But an additional and welcome editorial choice is to foreground the problem of American identity itself.

Fain's location was ideal for fueling her examination. Rogersville, in east Tennessee, was a crossroads: it was largely under Confederate control, but came periodically under Union control during the war. This fact makes for some of the anxious moments in the diary as Fain found that she had to defend her home, daughters, and slaves from both Union and local raiders. The diary offers a record of her daily activities and responsibilities and of the impact of the war on her home, family, and thought.

Eliza Fain was a devout Presbyterian who reflected almost daily on the goodness of God in her life and who, throughout the early diary, mentions giving religious tracts to soldiers. And, she is, at the same time, a staunch defender of slavery. The ways that she articulates this seemingly schizophrenic

combination--which was in no way odd for a woman of her era and class--is fascinating reading. Her faith is strong; it is her consolation, foundation, and justification for her station in life. It is the vehicle through which she understands her place in life, her relationship to her family and to slaves, and America itself. Fain is not an intellectual, but she is thoughtful. Her sense of the importance of things situated in their places in the great chain of being supports her notion of and allows her to make a critique of America. She writes on page 47: We felt we are as Israel of old the chosen people. We are the people whom God intends to use for the Christianizing of all lands. O compare that with the conviction which is now forced upon us in regard to the present prospects of our bleeding republic. Our Father has seemed to cast us from him as unworthy of the high trust he had committed to our care.

Understanding why this rejection has happened occupies Fain's thought. The South has done its part, she believes. Fain supports slavery, as both in tune with divine order and good for masters and slaves. But, the South has also failed. Fain criticizes amalgamation--miscegenation. This she calls the South's guilt because it has brought down God's wrath through introducing a violation of order: another race of beings into the world. Her meditations work to uphold the slave-holding South as the place where God our Father sustain[s] us even as she sees the end coming, the fall of the South. Here, the diary offers an unexpected conclusion. We expect, then, bitterness: the turn inward that characterized the postwar South. Fain's faith, however, never fails her. The final entries in this document may betray its public face, but they are interesting nevertheless. Fain says that she would never be willing to see [slavery's] shackles upon us again, but our Bible is the same. She turns back to the notion of the City on a Hill and God's design to understand her new world. In the end, God has not forsaken us; instead, God has presided over the development of a grand republic. This identification of American identity, even in chaos, with God's Providence is characteristic of Fain's time. Many African-American Reconstruction thinkers take just this tone. Her articulation reminds us of the deep roots, the permutations, and the longevity of that understanding, and examining the both beautiful and problematic quality of it is timely in our present historical circumstances.

Sanctified Trial is well organized and friendly to the reader. It offers informative introductory material, including an extremely helpful chapter presenting the principal characters and their relationships. Each of the seven chapters has its own introduction that leads the reader through important themes

in that section. The work ends with the funeral of Eliza Fain. There is a useful index, and maps and photographs add a visual layer to the words. This is a learned, academic work that sets the diary in the context of the current interest in autobiography, and, particularly, women's autobiography. That Fain clearly presents a document that bridges the public and the private is key for that field. The book's subject and supporting material, however, also make it interesting and accessible to the general reader. It would be of special interest to readers of Civil War documents, but its central figure, Eliza Fain, is a fascinating study, and we hope that John N. Fain will edit and present to us more of her diaries in the future.

Carolyn M. Jones is Associate Professor of Religion and in the Institute of African American Studies at the University of Georgia. She writes on Southern women writers and on the intersection of classical and modern literature.