

Frontier Feminist: Clarina Howard Nichols and the Politics of Motherhood

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Recommended Citation

Chambers, Lee (2011) "Frontier Feminist: Clarina Howard Nichols and the Politics of Motherhood," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.2.04

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss2/3>

Review

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Spring 2011

Blackwell, Marilyn S. and Oertel, Kristen T.. *Frontier Feminist: Clarina Howard Nichols and the Politics of Motherhood*. University of Kansas Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1728-9

Looking at Feminism on the Frontier

In this beautifully rendered and thoroughly researched biography of nineteenth-century reformer, newspaper woman, and political orator Clarina Howard Nichols (1810-1885), Marilyn S. Blackwell and Kristen T. Oertel offer a complex analysis of a conservatively inclined Yankee Baptist turned ‘frontier feminist’.

The authors attribute Clarina’s character and values to three factors: her family’s revolutionary heritage, her life on the Vermont, Kansas, and California frontiers, and her searing experience of marriage. Clarina was reared on the Vermont frontier where her father Chapin Howard owned a tannery, forge, and hotel. Artisan and entrepreneur, his involvement in the market revolution of the early Republic provided a genteel upbringing for Clarina and her siblings. Chapin’s civic engagement set an example for his sons who served in local and state office. Clarina contributed as public critic, political analyst, and advocate.

Like many New England daughters, Clarina and her sister Catherine married brothers--Justin and Mark Carpenter. Well-educated, the former became a schoolmaster and the latter a Baptist minister. Blackwell and Oertel have uncovered new details about Justin’s erratic marital behavior, including abuse and failure to provide. The subsequent divorce took Clarina back to Vermont where the Howards’s state representative saw to the passage of a bill permitting divorce for native Vermont couples whose difficulties occurred while living out of state. According to her biographers, Clarina learned from this a lesson in how political action could shape the law.

A second marriage to George Washington Nichols provided Clarina with economic security and the opportunity to pursue her intellectual interests. In taking on some of her husband's duties as editor of *The Wyndham County Democrat*, Clarina dedicated herself to the moral uplift and political education of their readers. Although she feared exposure of her divorce and the resulting loss of respectability, Clarina Howard Nichols began to write and speak of women's legal rights to their wages, property, and children.

In 1850, Clarina Howard Nichols served as Vermont's delegate to the first National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts. She became a popular speaker in the cause, sought after for a 900-mile tour through Wisconsin, for example. By this time, Clarina's six step-children by Nichols and three children by Justin Carpenter (Birsha, Howard and Aurelius) were adults, although her youngest, George Nichols, was not yet ten. Clarina sent Birsha, aged 22, to watch over George who attended the New Jersey school of abolitionists Theodore and Angelina Grimke Weld. The authors suggest that Clarina undertook reform lecturing to fulfill a growing interest in living and working among like-minded women.

Following her father's death in 1854 Clarina determined to settle in the West. Her goal was to ensure in Kansas an economy characterized by free-labor and a political system friendly to women's rights. She risked her husband's health, cashed in her inheritance and, with her sons Howard and Aurelius, drove to Lawrence under the auspices of the New England Emigrant Aid Society. As violence escalated in the western territories, her sons fell ill and her husband died; Clarina returned to the eastern lecture circuit.

Reunited with her remaining family in Missouri, in 1856, she collaborated on a Republican newspaper under the editorship of John M. Walden and worked to advance women's suffrage. In 1859, while canvassing the Kansas legislature for equal child custody rights for women, Clarina was arrested for assisting Lydia Peck in removing her children from her husband's care and returning them to Maine. In 1860 she rejoined the lecture circuit, renewing her campaign for married women's property rights and joint child custody in Ohio.

Financial concerns and the geographic dispersal of her children haunted Clarina when war came. Even as she rolled bandages, corresponded with the Woman's Loyal National League, and passed petitions to abolish slavery, she feared poverty and the growing violence on the Kansas-Missouri frontier. In the

spring of 1863, Nichols moved to Washington, D.C. to live with her daughter, and serving as a matron in the Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children. She returned to Kansas at war's end only to witness the legislature vote for black male suffrage while rejecting women's.

Nichols continued her campaign, publishing columns on women's suffrage in the *Vermont Phoenix* and the *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*. With her son Howard, daughter-in-law Sarah, and their two teenaged children, she moved to Wyandotte, Kansas to farm land she had purchased during the war. Her son, George, with his wife, Mary (a Wyandot Indian), also helped. Desperate for money, in fragile health, and feeling increasingly isolated, Clarina again turned westward. In December 1871, she left for California to join Aurelius and his wife Helen who had migrated there fifteen years earlier.

Clarina took a strong interest in the California woman's suffrage campaign. She renewed her correspondence with Susan B. Anthony, sending letters to the annual meetings of the National Woman Suffrage Association. In 1879 Anthony, seeking personal accounts of the women's suffrage campaign, obtained Nichols' memoir for her *National Citizen & Ballot Box*. She would devote an entire chapter to Clarina in her *History of Woman's Suffrage*, a decision the biographers suggest reflected Anthony's appreciation of Clarina's support during the scandal surrounding Anthony's association with Copperhead, Charles Francis Train while effectively exaggerating Nichols' role in the Kansas campaign.

Blackwell's and Oertel's challenge in this biography is to make Clarina Howard Nichols understandable and sympathetic. A woman of contradictions, Clarina insisted upon a mother's right to rear, care for, and educate her children, yet she left those of her first marriage to be raised by her parents. With her second marriage Clarina took on six step-daughters and bore another son, only to leave their care in the hands of her eldest daughter, Bisha Howard, because her reform and editorial work demanded increasing amounts of time. What are we to think of a mother who advocated for woman's rights on the grounds of maternalism but left her children's care to others?

The authors compare Nichols' ideology to that of single women reformers Antoinette Brown, Abby Price, and Harriot Hunt, all of whom adopted an ethical basis for women's claim to equal rights based on Biblical exegesis. Nichols rooted her feminism in the religious concept of "co-sovereignty". She valued

women's essential femininity, emphasizing their difference from men, but did so within a framework that celebrated men's and women's common humanity and shared moral obligations to God. But how did her marriage and motherhood inform her essentialism? How did it compare or contrast with that of her single and childless sister reformers?

Nichols' conservatism also raises questions about how nineteenth-century female journalists created a socially acceptable form of public womanhood. Nichols' notions of propriety were structured by fears of having her private history as a battered wife and divorcee exposed. She publicly confronted these only late in life when she briefly, and in somewhat vague terms, discussed these in her memoir. Nichols pursued respectability by presenting herself as "motherly", by posing, the authors inform us, "as a mother to the women and children of the nation" (263). Yet even as her political work drew her from her children, Clarina's thoughts on her own mothering remain opaque and her metaphor seems evasive.

Another issue that could use more thorough discussion has to do with Clarina's literary pose as a rustic philosopher and down-home feminist. Blackwell and Oertel describe Nichols' adoption of a folksy persona first as Vermont housewife 'Deborah Van Winkle' and then again as an old farm-woman from Jersey Forks, Wyandotte Turnpike, in Kansas. In both incarnations the columnist melded a conservative take on gender roles with a reform sensibility to write about the social and legal realities of women's lives. Even as Nichols sought in her professional guise to convey gentility, class, and womanliness, Clarina's masquerade as Van Winkle enabled her to lightly critique the legal position of women under marital and family law with humor. Even in California, Nichols' "Home Circle" column in the *Pacific Rural Press* utilized a thrifty, house-proud, female character to advocate woman's suffrage. More could be done to contextualize Nichols' strategy and persona within the heritage of down-home humor and common sense wisdom that would later make Marietta Holley as well-known as Mark Twain, and her feminist character 'Samantha Allen' a best-seller. Like Nichols, Holley conveyed a feminist critique that many readers might have rejected when coming from Susan B. Anthony, her friend and Nichols'. A further analysis of Winkle's dispensing of wit and wisdom within this literary tradition would add to our understanding of this fascinating woman and her brand of "frontier" feminism.

Lee Chambers is Associate Professor of History at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her recent publications include "Great Was the Benefit of His Death": The Political Uses of Maria Weston Chapman's Widowhood," in Rudolph M. Bell and Virginia Yans, Women on Their Own. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single (Rutgers University Press, 2008) and her book manuscript, "'Rocking the Nation like a Cradle': The Antislavery Weston Sisters" is under consideration at the University of North Carolina Press. Her current work examines the abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman and the construction of political womanliness in antebellum New England.