

A Family Secret: A Novel

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Review

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Andrews, Eliza Francis *A Family Secret: A Novel*. University of Tennessee Press, \$40.00 ISBN 1572334398

Family Life in the Wake of War

A World Fading From View

I have never been fond of Civil War-related novels. But I was pleasantly surprised when I read **A Family Secret** by Victorian author Eliza F. Andrews (1840-1931). Andrews was a plantation bred young woman from Georgia who became an author, teacher, and world-renowned botanist after the Civil War. She was a young adult when the War broke out, and some of the characters and events in the novel are based on her personal and family experiences.

A Family Secret was originally published in 1876 and was well received in both the South and the North. The new edition by the University of Tennessee Press was edited by faculty member S. Kittrell Rushing. His careful editing, introduction of the author and the original novel, and careful choice of family photos makes Andrews's novel come alive. Rushing does not get in the way of the text as sometimes happens with older novels and memoirs being prepared for the modern reader. He allows Andrews her full voice, choosing to let her detailed descriptions and floral chapter titles to stand. He also offers a suggested reading list that includes a valuable list of titles on Southern women, Southern society and Reconstruction, and includes a list of Andrews's published novels and journals. Her *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl* (University of Nebraska Press, ISBN 080325931X, \$16.95 softcover) is well known to those who research women and the Civil War, and through her novels, we see a new and more mature Eliza Andrews.

A Family Secret is a romance but includes mystery and military adventure, set against the backdrop of the last years of the American Civil War. The story revolves around Audley Malvern, a Confederate officer and a member of a

prominent first family, and Ruth Harfleur, a mysterious young woman and unknown heiress to a family fortune in Georgia. The story opens with the main characters meeting on a train when Ruth is only a child and brings them together again a decade later, traveling to Georgia to reunite with family. The plot unfolds to reveal two more interrelated families, establishing characters of an evil stepfather, a haunted best friend, beautiful sisters, a kindly aunt and uncle, and a long-lost and falsely accused father. Through a complicated but fast moving plot, Andrews spins several characters with descriptive talent, while creating the world of antebellum Georgia plantation life that is rapidly fading from view.

Andrews has created many characters from her own life, including the hero, Audley Malvern. Malvern is fashioned after her brother, Garnett Andrews, who is a Confederate officer in the Civil War. In fact, much of the novel is based on personal turmoil. Eliza's mother grew seriously ill, their family financial situation grew desperate, and family members had harrowing travel experiences through the War-torn South. These topics reveal themselves throughout the plot. Stories of conscripted soldiers, Andersonville Prison, and the backwoods rural folk known as Crackers enter the novel directly from stories told to Andrews by friends and family members who experienced them.

Throughout the novel, Andrews creates a fast-paced tale filled with anecdotes from her family's lives yet manages to create characters that are universal in their appeal. Yes, the novel contains some of the floral language typical of Victorian stories, and some of the characters cry for more depth. And, yes, Andrews does present the antebellum prejudices of her era toward the poor, uneducated classes and toward slaves. These prejudices primarily come out in her descriptions of the rural poor and their culture in the backwoods of Georgia and in the treatment of household slaves on the plantations she describes. But at the same time Andrews has created solid characters, and some of her best are the insidious figures of the vile stepfather (Julian Harfleur) and the simpering young minister (ne as Tadpole), both of whom are reminiscent of Dickens's characters. Andrews also had the literary courage to include rather graphic descriptions of the torture and death of two Confederate soldiers caught by bushwhackers near the end of the War. Hardly the text of light ladies fare, this novel is readable for both sexes.

Eliza Francis Andrews (originally published as Elzey Hay) was a unique example of an affluent Georgian girl who watched her family, finances, and culture change forever as a result of the Civil War. Rather than suffer silently in

the years of Reconstruction, Andrews taught, wrote, and published successfully, helping to support herself and her family. **A Family Secret** is a good read for teachers and students of history and of American Victorian literature. It will appeal to history buffs, reenactors, and particularly to those involved in Women's Studies of the era. Andrews has left us with solid, readable fiction that transcends time, which is the sign of good literature.

Karen R Mehaffey is a former academic librarian who now co-owns an American antiques business with her husband. Mehaffey has spoken on and written about women and the Civil War since 1986 and is currently working on a book on Confederate hospital matron Emily V. Mason.