

Mary Edwards Walker: Above and Beyond

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Review

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Walker, Dale L. *Mary Edwards Walker: Above and Beyond*. Forge, \$19.95 hardcover ISBN 765310651

A Life of Service Defying Convention and Attaining the Medal of Honour

Perhaps the most frustrating problem facing any historian is finding an interesting story that deserves to be told, yet lacks the necessary primary material to tell it fully. In his new book, **Mary Edwards Walker: Above and Beyond**, Dale Walker uses diary fragments, editorials, army records and newspaper clippings to piece together the life story of one woman who defied convention to become a Civil War physician and recipient of the United States Medal of Honor.

Born on November 26, 1832, in the town of Oswego, New York, Mary Edwards Walker was the fifth child of Alvah Walker and Vesta Whitcomb Walker. Alvah owned a mechanic's shop, and with Vesta, operated a rambling 33 acre farm off Bunker Hill Road. What the family lacked financially, Dale Walker notes, they made up for intellectually. Alvah adhered to a strong moral code--the family's Bunker Hill property served as a station on the famous Underground Railroad--and was a self taught country doctor. As a young girl, Mary spent hours in her father's medical library and nurtured a dream of becoming a physician. After a stint as a schoolteacher in the nearby village of Minetto, Mary gained admission to Syracuse Medical College in 1852, where she graduated in June 1855 as the only female member of her class.

Fully qualified and ready to embark on her medical career, Mary faced a hostile mid 19th century world that remained dubious of the merits of female practitioners. This scepticism was compounded by Mary's physical appearance. Clad in a swallowtail coat over trousers, a boiled white shirt and stiff collar, necktie, waistcoat (with watch chain across the front), and a silver topper, (58) Dr. Walker alienated her mainstream clientele by speaking out against the ailments produced by wearing unhygienic Dress. From the crown of the head to

the soles of the feet, she proclaimed, the women are unhealthfully attired (60). After a failed attempt to establish a practice in Columbus, Ohio, Mary returned home to Bunker Hill, where she wed fellow doctor, Albert Miller, in 1855. Their marriage was a brief and unhappy one, and the couple separated in 1861. Mary struggled to make a living as a horse and buggy doctor, finally relinquishing her practice to embark on a series of lecture tours where she spoke on issues including dress reform, the evils of alcohol and tobacco, venereal disease, abortion and inhumane prison conditions.

The coming of war became a defining moment in Mary's career, and Dale Walker's analysis of her tenacity and commitment to assist sick and wounded soldiers is a great strength of his book. After traveling to Washington in October 1861, the War Department rejected Mary's appeal for service in the field. Undeterred by this setback, she volunteered as a civilian medical worker at Indiana Hospital. Mary worked diligently for several weeks, earning the respect of Dr J.N. Green, surgeon-in-charge of Indiana Hospital, who unsuccessfully petitioned the government for an appointment and pay for his new assistant. Demoralized, Mary left her post in January 1862 and traveled to New York, where she obtained a certificate in hydrotherapy from the Hygeia Therapeutic College. By late 1862, she had returned to the battlefields, volunteering in field hospitals in Warrenton, Virginia.

Mary Walker's struggle for professional recognition met with little success. For most of the war, she acted as a civilian volunteer, ever searching for the medical position that alluded her. Yet within the field hospitals of Virginia, Mary quickly earned the respect of both her colleagues and her patients. According to Dale Walker, she made forays among the civilian populace for such common but scarce items as kettles, basins, and pails in which to boil water, and rags for bandages and for bathing her fevered patients" (111). Shocked by the frequency and volume of amputations, Mary confidentially counseled her patients to regard the procedure as a last resort. In November 1862, she convinced Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside to relocate wounded soldiers from the Warrenton field hospitals to Washington D.C. Walker triumphantly accompanied her patients to Washington, and left army life to operate a home for women and children searching for their sick and wounded relatives.

In 1864, Mary was appointed civilian contract surgeon to the 52nd Ohio stationed near Chattanooga, and she made daily trips on horseback to attend to the sick and wounded soldiers and civilians in the town and outlying areas. Dale

Walker explains that it was Mary's willingness to travel into enemy territory to attend to the sick--irrespective of their allegiances--that earned her the United States Medal of Honor. Under the guise of medical service, Mary also traveled into the Confederacy to obtain information on troop movements in Georgia. Her spying forays led to her capture by Confederate troops in April 1864. She was transferred by Union troops to Richmond, Virginia, where she was imprisoned for four months in a tobacco factory called Castle Thunder. After her release, Mary returned to the lecture circuit to speak of her war experiences and to stump for the re-election of Lincoln. She served as surgeon-in-charge of Louisville Female Military Prison Hospital, and later, worked at an orphan and refugee asylum in Clarksville, Tennessee. She resigned from the army in June 1865, and within months, was awarded the Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service by President Andrew Johnson. The medal became Mary's proudest possession, states Dale Walker on page 167, and she wore it from the day it was presented until her death fifty-four years later.

Like many American women, Mary Walker struggled to carve out a place for herself in the post war world. She continued to give lectures and set up a modest medical practice. She also published two books: *Hit* in 1871, which included chapters on woman suffrage, dress reform, marriage and divorce, and *Unmasked, or the Science of Immorality, To Gentlemen by a Woman Physician and Surgeon*, which analyzed a variety of subjects including morning sickness, the hymen, and hermaphrodites. Mary's radical views led to her split with the mainstream woman's rights movement, primarily because she favored civil disobedience and mass demonstrations as a way to achieve suffrage. After the death of her father and a lecture stint with the Kohl and Middleton Agency, she retired to the family's Bunker Hill Road farm in 1891. In 1917, a board of retired generals appointed to investigate and determine if any Medals of Honor had been awarded for any cause other than distinguished conduct in action involving actual conflict with an enemy', (198) withdrew Mary's Medal of Honor. Heartbroken and indignant, Mary unsuccessfully petitioned the board to reverse their decision. She died two years later, on 21 February 1919, still wearing her beloved Medal of Honor, which was reinstated to her by President Jimmy Carter on 10 June 1977.

Dale Walker has pieced together this biography using fragments of primary material. Mary Walker herself noted in her autobiography that her father had urged her to keep a diary during her time in the army. I attempted to do [so] for a time, she remarked, but there was so much to be written and I was so weary that

I abandoned it after a brief time(82). Phrases such as probably and possibly are therefore unavoidable yet frustrating statements that punctuate the book. While brief interludes on issues such as medicine during the Civil War, pioneers of the women's rights movement, and the Medal of Honor all serve to inform the reader, a greater engagement with more recent scholarship on American women would have enhanced the work significantly. Walker's book is not an academic book and should not be judged as such. However, it would have benefited from greater contextualization. Mary's struggle to pursue her career offers up a fascinating story about how one woman sought to define her place in the postwar world. It is frustrating that Walker failed to pursue these aspects of Mary's life story in the light of recent scholarship, as doing so may have helped to flesh out episodes where little primary material existed. Nevertheless, Dale Walker's biography will prove a useful and enjoyable text for general readers and undergraduate students.

Giselle Roberts is a Research Associate in American History at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of The Confederate Belle (University of Missouri Press, 2003) and the editor of The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson (University of Georgia Press and the Southern Texts Society, 2004).