

### Stepdaughters Of History: Southern Women And The American Civil War

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## Review

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**Clinton, Catherine** *Stepdaughters of History: Southern Women and the American Civil War*. LSU Press, \$27.50 ISBN 9780807164570

### From Periphery to Center: Southern Women and the American Civil War

This concise volume marks the publication of three lectures that Catherine Clinton delivered at Louisiana State University in 2012 as the honored Walter Lynwood Fleming lecturer in Southern history. The Fleming lectures have been a venerable LSU tradition for nearly eighty years, and in that time, only a handful of female historians have been invited to contribute. Fittingly, then, Clinton's three lectures-turned-essays focus on the history and historiography of southern women in the Civil War era.

Despite its slim size, this volume packs an outsized punch. It is a tour de force for Clinton, an exposition of her vast and deep knowledge of the field in which she has worked—and written or edited nearly thirty books—throughout her distinguished career. The lectures and resulting book are part of her larger project to move women from the footnotes and sidebars of Civil War history and into the center of the narrative—a place where they clearly saw themselves. “I believe in taking every opportunity to afford women a platform, a place at the table,” she writes in the introduction, “even when we don’t like the menu.” (xvii)

Clinton's first chapter examines white Confederate women and their Civil War experiences, a relatively virgin terrain when Clinton began her career. Historians have trafficked the field with gusto during the past two decades and Clinton highlights their valuable contributions. She is just as intent, however, on showing how able Confederate women themselves, who constituted a veritable “sisterhood of scribblers” after the war, were at shaping and re-shaping the Confederate experience for hungry readers. She credits this “dethroned plantation royalty,” the likes of LaSalle Pickett and, most famously, Mary Boykin Chestnut, among others with “erect[ing] a barricade, a façade, incorporating remembrances of things imagined,” which largely came to

dominate the national reading of the war for decades. (2)

In chapter two, Clinton turns away from the elite women who were meant to emblemize southern societal expectations to those women who either chose or were forced to transgress them. Her starting point is Loreta Janeta Valazquez, the Cuban-born, Louisiana-raised woman who, after the death of her husband and children, donned male clothing and took up arms as Confederate Lt. Henry Burford in 1861. Clinton argues convincingly that Valazquez's experience may have been unusual, but it certainly was not singular. Hundreds of southern women engaged in transgressive acts including cross-dressing, spying, smuggling and other gender-bending acts in service of the Confederacy. Acknowledging both the problems and the promises of fragmentary evidence of these women, she insists that whatever we may think of their cause and motivations, that "these spirited patriots require interrogation." (74)

Clinton centers her final chapter, "Mammy By Any Other Name," on that highly problematic archetypical southern figure that has historically rendered black women "disembodied and anonymous." (76) She lays out in example after despairing example how, despite the bold and important contributions of black women as well as those of the the historians who study them, the mythology of Mammy continues to subsume the historical identity of southern African American women. This problem appeared in all-too-bold relief when, during a recent discussion of who might Alexander Hamilton on the ten-dollar bill, one scholar vetoed Harriet Tubman, claiming that "the American people might not be prepared to accept a 'Mammy' image on [their] money." (77) Clinton remains hopeful, however, that the cultural tide is turning thanks to modern historiography, and most importantly, social efforts such as the #SayHerName initiative. "Mammy may seem to have nine lives," she quips, "but hopefully at least eight of them are gone." (110)

*Stepdaughters of History* highlights the many stories southern women left of their Civil War experiences, as well as their narratives were variously embraced, discounted, buried, or eventually debunked. The book serves as a bold and breezy appreciation of all of the important work that historians have done in the field to reveal and interpret southern women's experiences, and as a call for them to do more. Clinton blends her historiographical and historical terrain seamlessly, and her piercing and witty prose is imminently readable, making this book essential reading both for people who have read much southern women's history and for those who have read none.

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