

Keep the Days: Reading the Civil War Diaries of Southern Women

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Review

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Steven Stowe examines the published diaries of twenty women who “wrote the war” in the South in an effort to make sense of the catastrophic events playing out in their region, communities, and homes. Diary-keeping was also a way to self-soothe, discharge nervous energy, and work out anxieties with a constant “companion,” and writing was an emotional anchor in times when change was the only constant thing. Diaries were also way that women, trained to be seen-and-not-heard, could have a (silent) voice, but a permanent one, creating a war record, a memorial of *When the World Ended*. Diaries are personal histories and genteel southern women fell hard off of their pedestal and wrote about the collapse of what they knew and what they expected with fiery, witty, and often funny entries that most never intended for us to read.

Stowe is delighted by these lady writers, and suggests that it is possible – nay, necessary – to connect with diarists on an emotional level – across space and time. Stowe acknowledges that this may seem like a tall order and a difficult one for “we moderns,” but approaching the published diaries with empathy is, he suggests, the key, though what Stowe means by empathy is not always clear. Stowe said that he connected to these Civil War diarists by finding commonality in writing: the diary’s “perpetual first draft” quality felt familiar, and this was a place to begin.

The impulse to bridge deep social, cultural, and racial divides is understandable given our current national discontent. Stowe suggests that by approaching others – even those long dead – with an open mind and empathetic spirit, will reward the reader with a richer understanding of women’s experience of the Civil War home front and, perhaps, of their own life.

Women wrote about things we can all understand: they were impulsive, gossipy, manipulative, selfish, unhinged, overwrought, vindictive, petulant, and prone to tantrums, but so are we. Through self-reflection, Stowe says we can relate to these scribbling women; we might

ask ourselves if we are really so different from planter-class southerners at all. Empathy seems reasonable and broad-minded.

But Stowe conflates empathetic reading of historic texts with withholding judgment; if empathy exists, then judgment cannot or should not. Southern women have been treated badly by historians and they deserve a reassessment, and by readers who are as impressed with their pluck as is Stowe. A better understanding of the women's war, then, requires a broad-minded attitude of fair play in which the reader must commit to a "judgment-free zone." This is, of course, nonsense. It seems an odd argument to make that the harsh light of history has been unflattering to Confederate women and perhaps, with more empathy, our understanding of their world would change. These diarists wouldn't have seen it that way: having a hard time connecting to the experience of slave-owning planters isn't a result of lack of understanding; the diarists weren't generally ambivalent or unclear about their support of white supremacy. Occasionally they expressed doubts, but only when it was clear that their positions would cost them everything. To suggest that southerners were just unlucky enough to inhabit an earlier space on the arc of history that had not yet bent toward justice denies their agency and responsibility and it is strangely ahistorical to urge readers to shelve their moral compass in an effort to find commonality with slave holders.

Stowe examines entries centered around four domestic concerns: men, love, slaves, and themselves. These themes are certainly staples in diaries, but southern diarists also wrote about topics that had significance for southern culture and society for generations. Civil War diarists wrote about their personal grief and sorrow, but many were also explicitly aware of how their personal loss fit into the broader Confederate narrative of loss and vindication. Diaries were personal, but also political: they were a permanent, intimate first-hand account of the violation of the South, as the Lost Cause myth-makers described defeat. These diaries were texts for generations of southerners who sought to rebuild the social, political, and cultural edifice of white privilege. Confederate women were feisty, sure, and they were also powerfully dedicated to maintaining the deeply divided modern context we find ourselves struggling to bridge.

The few instances of racial conflict in the diary entries that Stowe includes have an unreal, clueless, *Gone-with-the-Wind* quality about them: Lucy Breckinridge was moved to tears when her nephew hit a slave boy his age with a stick while his mother, Breckinridge's sister, encouraged him. She concludes that she would raise her own children never to beat their slaves.

Stowe is, of course, making a judgement when he chooses to relate self-serving scenes like this one which paint women as oblivious and just doing the best they can, given their circumstance. Civil War diaries are important precisely because they demonstrate how aware, intentional, powerful, and full of rage many women were as a result of the disappointment of so many of their expectations.

Our natural disinclination to empathize with women's crocodile tears at witnessing the brutality of the system that she herself was invested in maintaining is actually a sign of the triumph of morality, not a failure to empathize or to understand those unlike ourselves. It is moral relativism to suggest that we must extend empathy "on all sides," and, worse, it obscures power structures and privilege, which thus obscures our understanding of the significance of women's war diaries. While our understanding of the Civil War and of the women who lived through it is certainly not improved with curses or maledictions, it is "faux woke" and patronizing to suggest that our ability to understand the experiences of Civil War diarists would deepen or expand if we could just be a bit less judgmental.

Dr. Karen Rubin studied southern history at Florida State University and researches the role of southern women in historical memory through diaries, scrapbooks, and memorialization.