

# Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints

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## Review

**Janda, Lance**

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**Giesberg, Judith and Randall M. Miller.** *Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints*. Kent State University Press, \$28.95 ISBN 9781606353400

In *Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints*, Professors Judith Giesberg and Randall M. Miller have assembled a very strong edited collection of 16 essays designed to integrate women's and Civil War history and to systematically compare the experiences of women across regional boundaries and throughout the entire Civil War era. The goal of the work is to confront what Giesberg and Miller consider the segregation and racial gendering of many histories of the period, and to broaden and deepen our understanding of the wide array of women's experiences and their still underappreciated importance in any effort to appreciate the reality of the Civil War in both the North and the South.

To accomplish this task the editors assembled an unusually accomplished group of scholars and asked them to produce paired essays that focused on women's experiences in North and South during the Civil War within the context of eight specific themes: Politics, Family, Relief, Mobilization, Religion, Emancipation, Reconstruction, and Memory. This format is one of the real strengths of the collection, as it focuses the essays and presents readers with context and detailed points of references around which to build a greater understanding of the differences and similarities between women's experiences. It mitigates the tendency of so many anthologies to wander far beyond asserted themes and allows readers to focus on specific issues in a comparative manner that is thought provoking and will provoke spirited classroom and seminar discussions on university campuses.

As with most anthologies, there is no overarching thesis and the quality of the essays varies. Chapters are comparative and analytical rather than narrative, but the best of them include new research and strong writing that reveals new points of view and offers evocative accounts of women's experiences that will strike readers as poignant and offer them insights they are

unlikely to have encountered before. Examples include Elizabeth Parish Smith's chapter, "In Times of Change and Trouble Like These," an especially good account of Reconstruction in the South; W. Scott Poole's "Hasten the Day: Slavery's Apocalypse Among Enslaved Women and Planter Women in the Civil War South;" and Elizabeth R. Varon's "Southern Women and Politics in the Civil War Era."

The collection is generally well researched, with a nice mix of primary and secondary sources, and the writing and analysis are typically strong. The work would have benefited from more illustrations and perhaps a chapter on the experience of military women and/or women and fighting, but these are small criticisms overall. The book is highly recommended for university students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and for scholars in the field.

*Lance Janda is Professor of History and Chair of the Department of Social Sciences at Cameron University. He is the author of Stronger Than Custom: West Point and the Admission of Women, and "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880," which appeared in The Journal of Military History, among other works.*