

Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War

Jean Baker

Goucher College, jean.baker@goucher.edu

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Review

Jean H. Baker

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McCurry, Stephanie. *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019. HARDCOVER. \$26.95 ISBN: 978067498975. pp. 320.

It has taken more than a century for historians to write women into the American Civil War. At first the inclusions answered straightforward questions about what they did. As home front studies proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s, women appeared in their traditional roles as nurses and help mates, placing their domestic arts in service to the Union and, to a lesser extent, the Confederacy. In these accounts they sewed uniforms, sent boxes of supplies to the front and organized popular fundraisers called sanitary fairs. In a raft of studies they were depicted as humanitarians, joining the Woman's Central Relief Association and the male-dominated United States Sanitary Commission. Not content to stay home and run farms, some four hundred women were discovered to have disguised themselves as men and joined the Union army.

In *Women's War* Stephanie McCurry moves women's role in the Civil War into more analytical territory. Of course, she argues, they were always there as agents, not just observers, circumstances understood at the time but lost when they were scrubbed from history books that concentrated on the battlefield and policy-making. McCurry begins with the somewhat overstated premise, given recent studies, that women have been written out of Civil War history. Influenced by her own personal experience growing up in Belfast during the Troubles, she carries the passionate conviction, as she writes on page 3, that "Women are not just witnesses to history but actors and makers of it.... Women are indispensable subjects in the story of the Civil War."

McCurry provides three unique examples of the women's role in the Civil War. In this extremely well-sourced book, she is at home using international and historical reference points as well as engaging in contested contemporary interpretations, for example, current meta-meanings of Reconstruction. At the heart of *Women's War* are, first, the Union Army's confrontations with

Confederate women and the ways in which these encounters changed the understandings of female innocence and civilian wartime immunity. McCurry's second example focuses on black enslaved women fugitives (refugees from oppression or in today's language, asylum seekers) in an environment that categorized, them when freed, soldiers' wives. The third covers a Confederate plantation woman's effort to recreate her life amid the loss of slaves, inheritance and respect for her husband. Taken together, McCurry writes on page 3, "[these stories] demonstrate the power of women's perspective to transform our vision of war, even of one so exhaustively dissected as the American Civil War."

She begins with Lieber's Code, the wartime instructions for military behavior written in 1863 by Francis Lieber, a Columbia College professor, at the behest of the Lincoln administration. While most studies of Lieber and his influential 1863 General Orders No. 100 have concentrated on the emancipation clauses, the new definition of "war treason" and, to a lesser extent, on women as rape victims, McCurry offers a stunning further interpretation. While Lieber was writing his influential code on military behavior, General Halleck and his fellow Union commanders were dealing with Confederate women's persistent guerrilla activities, especially in Missouri and Tennessee. Union soldiers who were ordered not to make war on women and children confronted women who were cutting telegraph wires, smuggling medicine and arms, and spying on Union movements. The people's war included women whose behavior jolted the traditional view of noncombatants and the protections afforded them.

Given conditions in the field, Halleck rejected traditional distinctions. He informed Lieber that there were disloyal people of all ages and sexes, even using a reference to those engaged in war treason (a new understanding) "[who] not only forfeit all claim to protection but subjects *himself or herself* to be punished as a spy or military traitor." (p. 44) In his final version, Lieber modernized the laws of civil war, eroding civilian protections and severing the traditional linkage of women and innocence. But his code did not contain, as Halleck and the harassed military commanders in the field had found necessary, any explicit mention of how to treat enemy women. And after the war, McCurry notes in her epilogue, Lieber knew better when he overlooked women's roles in the war and opposed women's suffrage, hawking patriarchal views of women.

The second example involves enslaved women whose story McCurry properly argues has been neglected. In her nuanced reading, problems of their status began with the arrival of Union armies in slave territory and the determined effort of what were then considered fugitive slaves—male and female-- to find freedom. General Benjamin Butler, one of the first commanders to deal with the matter, applied the wartime category of “contraband.” As such, males could be usefully employed and then according to the Confiscation Acts, freed. But what of women? Who were they? In time they became the black soldier’s wife, whose freedom was contingent on the military service of her husband. But everyone knew that slave marriage was illegal in the South, a conundrum that hardly bothered military commanders. It did perplex congressmen in Washington.

McCurry dissects the debates as congressmen pondered the problem of black female emancipation before Lincoln’s Proclamation. She also deals with the facts on the ground as thousands of black men, women and children flooded into army camps with women actively resisting the Freedman’s Bureau efforts to put them to work on liberated plantations. As many as 100,000 refugees, attracted to what McCurry calls “the magnet” of the Union army, were living in camps in the Mississippi valley. The effort to establish some sort of order led to the insistence that black women were wives, dependent on their soldier husbands for support. Yet women who registered their marriages had to fight for any financial protections and, as McCurry notes, marriage for all women remained a dependent state. To the degree that black women were wives, they were not emancipated.

The final and longest chapter in *Women’s War* focuses on Gertrude Thomas, Georgia plantation mistress and diary-keeper whose reflections have provided historians with a rich source of material. Given her deep understanding of Civil War history, McCurry deconstructs Thomas’s post-war impoverishment in novel ways that reveal not just Thomas’s grim financial decline but the struggle of her former enslaved to map out new lives as wage earners. Thomas comes to understand that some of the enslaved are her half-sisters and brothers, a searing acknowledgement when these blood relatives were enslaved but humiliating when they are free.

McCurry’s reading of the oft-bowdlerized Thomas diary also displays the personal toll that indebtedness during Reconstruction took on Thomas’s marriage, as her feckless husband mishandled her inherited property. Even her home was at risk; her son sued her; another son was

forced to leave school to work on the farm, while Thomas agonized about the competition he faced with “mulatto boys, perhaps his father’s sons by a woman a shade darker than his mother...” Contemporary views of Reconstruction notwithstanding, for McCurry, Thomas’s postwar account is “a valuable reminder of the...fundamental (even elemental) nature of the re-ordering underway.” (p. 202)

Women’s War is a major contribution to Civil War history and beyond. It is not without minor flaws. There is repetition, even of whole sentences. There are questionable assertions: To write that slave emancipation was the war’s legacy seems to entirely exclude union-saving; Maryland emancipated its slaves in 1864; Union border states did not undergo invading Union armies. But these are quibbles about a path-breaking, insightful book.

Jean H. Baker is the retired Bennet-Harwood professor of history at Goucher College. She is the author of eleven books including *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* and the co-authored textbook *Civil War and Reconstruction*. Her most recent book, *Building America: The Life of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, will be available in January 2020.