H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melissa Walker Heidari, ed. *To Find My Own Peace: Grace King in Her Journals, 1886-1910.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004. xxxvii + 247 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2565-1.

Reviewed by Caroline Janney (Department of History, University of Virginia)

Published on H-SAWH (January, 2005)

The Mind of a Southern Woman

Most historians of the late-nineteenth-century South are familiar with Grace Elizabeth King (1852-1932) as a prolific "local color" author. King strove to provide an authentic portrait of her region through histories, fiction, and even autobiography. The private thoughts and personal struggles of this well-known author are now also accessible, thanks to the meticulous editing and research of Melissa Walker Heidari. After combing the forty-nine volumes of King's papers at Louisiana State University, she narrowed the works to be published down to three journals that best reflect the famous writer's most private self.

King emerges as a strong, passionate woman with mixed reactions to the world in which she lived. *To Find My Own Peace* reveals much about the complexities of gender, race, class, and region in post-Reconstruction New Orleans. Heidari succeeds marvelously in reaching her two-fold goal: contributing to the scholarship on King and providing insight into the culture of the New South. Heidari unveils a woman far different from the unassuming portrait offered by King's published works: a humorous and ironic woman willing to engage in "a more candid assessment of herself and others" in her journals (p. xxxvii). King's private musings, therefore, offer a window onto contemporary debates about gender and race, the evolving notion of family, and the transitory nature of literary fame.

Born in the decade before the Civil War to a socially prominent family, King and her six siblings enjoyed the luxuries of an extravagant home and a private education. Like so many families of their stature, the King family lost nearly everything in the course of the war and was forced to rent a house in a less-than-fashionable district of New Orleans. Despite this disruption, the King children received a solid education, and by the mid-1880s Grace King had turned to writing for both financial and intellectual reasons.

A well-known writer in the late-nineteenth century, King joined the ranks of New South authors such as George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. During a period of nearly fifty years, she wrote three novels, two novellas, four histories, three collections of stories, two biographies, an autobiography, a drama, and countless articles. In 1886, she first gained

popularity with the publication of "Monsieur Mott" in the *Century Illustrated Magazine* and soon thereafter produced one of her most famous short stories, "The Little Covenant Girl."[1] Despite her success, King felt overwhelmed by her turbulent life, writing to her sister May King McDowell, "I am afraid I shall have to commence a diary to find my own peace in my own life" (p. 1). For the next quarter of a century, King indeed found solace in her journaling. She also found a place in which "to grapple with her conflicted feelings" about her identity as a white southern woman coming of age in the New South (p. 1).

As journals are apt to do, King's writings meander from topic to topic; sometimes she offers one-line quotes, while other times she spends pages unpacking a persona, commenting on the weather, detailing her travels, or recounting incidents from the previous day. Her entries, too, provide portals into her fiction, offering her space to try out themes and characters, as in a sketch of a tailor immigrant she penned in 1887 and published the following year as "Sympathy" (pp. 30, 214 n. 36).

As a well-known figure, King was in many ways an anomaly among southern white women. But in her private writings, the reader is privy to the logic that led to her complex attitudes regarding the harsh realities of race and gender in the South, free from the critical eye of the public. She critiqued southern white women and mocked her rival, author Isa Carrington Cabell of Virginia. Simultaneously, King offers a perspective on issues that touched every woman of her station, such as her lamentations on the death of her mother and brother and details about family conflicts. Overall, her journals reveal the rich texture of southern life, especially that of the region's white and black women. Her reflections on the centrality of white and black women to "civilizing" the nation, for example, offer historians and literary critics alike ample material for evaluating the postwar South's racial ideologies.

In this vein, one of the most effective ways the journals could be tapped is through a generational approach. Like many other "New Women" of the South, King had experienced the Civil War as a child and grown to adulthood during Reconstruction, and both events greatly influenced her expectations and outlook. As she recalled in 1904, "the Confederacy was the great dominating circumstance" of her life. "How different life would have been without it," she commented (p. 148). Indeed, without the war, she might not have turned to the pen or ventured into debates over women's suffrage. Students of the period might use her journals to explore the ways in which women of King's generation understood themselves, their position in society, and their role in politics.

One of the best features of this collection is the biographical and contextual information provided by Heidari (which would have been even more helpful had the book's notes appeared with the text as footnotes rather than tucked away at the end of the book). Heidari's annotations illuminate the diarist's motives and connections, and include references to such prominent individuals as fellow Louisiana author George Washington Cable, writer Mark Twain, and novelist Charles King.

As with King's novels, short stories, and other writings, these journals, and Heidari's editing of them, are invaluable for a better understanding of the turn-of-the-century South, with all its rich complexity.

Note

[1]. On King's life and work, see Robert Bush, ed., *Grace King of New Orleans: A Selection of Her Writings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973); Robert Bush, *Grace King: A Southern Destiny* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); and David Kirby, *Grace King* (Boston: Twayne, 1980).