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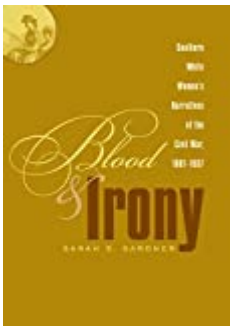

Sarah E. Gardner. *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861â??¢1937.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. x + 352 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2818-2.

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They Weren't Southern Belles, They Were Warriors

Rarely does it happen that a book dedicated to history may be called a "page turner." Nevertheless, *Blood and Irony* is just that. Gardner delves deeply into the Southern psyche from the rare viewpoint of the Southern woman and does so with grace and gentle authority. Gardner manages to give readers a decidedly different view of the Civil War and of Southern women. In doing so, she offers not only historians but also casual readers a view of the war diametrically opposed to what most might think they know and understand.

First and foremost, Gardner's subject provides a decidedly different view of the Civil War from the usual male power brokering and posturing. She has well and ably researched the words and thoughts of the losing side–from the viewpoint of a stereotyped section of the Southern population, white Southern women, without injecting any judgment or propagandistic bombast. She says, "Southern white women soon realized that the end of the war had not signaled an end to the suffering, a release of hatred, an acceptance of the terms of surrender, or a willingness to reintegrate into the Union" (p. 42). White Southern womanhood saw the loss of the Civil War as due to a lack of moral rectitude, a flaw in character, or some lack of a spiritual correctness which removed God from their side. So, although it was hard for them, they began to write, take oral histories to heal the "broken spirit" (p. 43) of the South, as if to have records for the generations to come so that the flaw of character which caused God to abandon the South might be corrected.

And write with vengeance, these women did. Many had never been writers and feared they could not accurately portray the travails of the South. It appears they overcame such doubts with a certain amount of ease because they felt they were warriors with pens. From 1861 to 1865, a host of writers produced a plethora of romances, most notably *The Heroine of the Confederacy*, which speaks to the "constancy of the women at home" (p. 34). These women felt that to produce books about hearth, home, and women not unlike the Spartans of old was a patriotic duty.

After the surrender of the South, many of the writers felt betrayed and like captives. They did not trust the North to be decent. Some stopped writing entirely,

others paused and wondered if were proper for them to write about "military matters" (p. 43). Sarah A. Dorsey rose to the challenge of propriety and wrote not only histories, but also defenses of Southern military leadership. Belle Boyd, a Southern spy, wrote her account of the war from exile in England. Judith B. McGuire wrote from personal experience in *Diary of a Southern Refugee during the War*. Others took on the North as if the Devil incarnate were present, writing against "intersectional marriage"– that is, marriage between Northerners and Southerners (p. 65). And they did not hesitate to include Southern men suspected of cowardice or cravenness, either, as appropriate focuses for hatred and loathing.

After Reconstruction, Southern women began to write about memory of the war; they felt they had an obligation to provide historical inquiry from a Southern viewpoint. In the chapter entitled "The Imperative of Historical Inquiry," Gardner gives readers a psychological look at the scars the Civil War carved on Southern society. Almost as if unwilling to allow full surrender, Southern women writers took to the pages to celebrate the "men who wore the grey Ã¢?Â¦ [and] Ã¢?Â¦ celebrate the past, not to reform the present" (p. 117). The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) was formed and a historical committee for that group began to attempt to standardize formats for the recording of history from the Southern viewpoint. Claiming to "prize truth above all else," the UDC attempted to impose its interpretation on what was written (p. 123). Around 1877 the UDC reinforced the idea that the war was a "war between the states" and not a Civil War (p. 125). They banned histories that portrayed Lincoln as a hero, that the South had fought to protect slavery, or that the North had initially attempted to nonviolently engage the South. The wives of Southern generals, especially Helen Dortch Longstreet, began the reconstruction of their husbands' careers, turning them from less-thanable leaders to heroes of the Confederacy. They did not see their efforts as censorship, however, but as providing a view to the "war of Northern aggression" that standard history might not necessarily provide. And they were right in their assumption, "that they understood the origins, meanings, and implications of war and defeat for themselves and Southern society Ã¢?Â¦ that directly contrasted northern historians' dominant interpretations" (p. 4).

It is at the end of the war that the myth of "The Lost Cause" began to rise to great height, and even still influences Southern culture and outlook today; as an example, Gardner cites one writer, Caroline Gordon, who, in a 1974 address to the Flannery O'Connor Foundation, described herself as "a totally unreconstructed Confederate" (p. 262). Bag and baggage of the Lost Cause myth is that the South fought only for states' rights, that the war had little to do with slavery, that the South lost the war because of some spiritual lacking. As a result, the South was doomed to failure. White Southern women writing after Reconstruction were attempting to "right the wrongs of history," as Gardner says (p. 159). And there was discussion of *Gone With the Wind*, whose "frenzy that followed publication" forced Margaret Mitchell to run from Atlanta to the north Georgia mountains (p. 246).

It is the sections concerning the Lost Cause and white Southern women writers' addition to it that are surprisingly interesting for a discerning modern reader. In studying the attempt of Southern white women writers to rectify what they perceived as the wrongs of the past and to blame failure on moral weakness, readers may glimpse the echoes of that time in today's world of "blue" and "red" states and in the idea that God has granted special permission to engage in the Iraqi conflict. While Gardner does not deal with the continuing impact of white Southern women writers on Southern culture today, their influence can be found. Gardner's book certainly offers an insight into the workings of today's presidential administration by looking at the traditions of the past. As Gardner says, "Everything that rises must converge" (p. 251). The white Southern women of whom Gardner writes certainly believed that the South would rise again if only they kept the faith; perhaps we are seeing a resurgence from the roots of that peculiar belief in today's political arenas. Such conjecture is provoked and worthy after reading *Blood and Irony*.

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