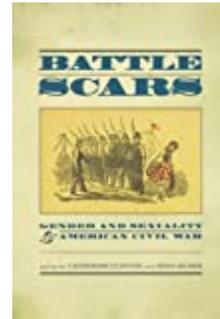




Nina Silber. *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xi + 213 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517445-8; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-517444-1.



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Published on H-CivWar (March, 2007)

Placing Gender in Civil War Historiography

For many generations the majority of scholarly and public inquiry surrounding the Civil War has focused on military campaigns, politics, and heroic personalities. Over the past twenty or thirty years, scholars have begun to focus their attention on fleshing out Civil War society as a whole and examining the war's impact on ordinary citizens. The advent of new social history and women's history in the 1960s and 1970s inspired historians to relocate peripheral groups, such as women and African Americans, to the center of historical inquiry in order to construct a more complete picture of the Civil War's impact on American society. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber's path-breaking 1992 compilation, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, critically evaluated the Civil War's impact on conceptions of gender. Continuing in that tradition, *Battle Scars* offers new interpretations in this line of inquiry by bringing together a variety of essays that consider not just the experiences of men and women, but gender as a social construct that focuses on "the cultural and ideological systems that have shaped the behavior of both men and women, and the interaction between the Civil War and that larger cultural framework about sex roles" (p. 4). This approach,

as the editors note, not only complements the intense focus on the Civil War's military and political matters, but also considers men and women's lives in the context of the nineteenth century's relatively strict gender roles. The tumultuous experience of war upset socially sanctioned patterns of gender behavior and ideals as women assumed heretofore masculine roles on the home front, as men dealt with defeat, and as former slaves sought to assert their identity following emancipation. Accordingly, *Battle Scars* examines how both black and white men and women dealt with the "gender crisis" that the Civil War propelled and evaluates how the war refashioned the ideals of masculinity and womanhood.

The editors have arranged the collection chronologically, beginning with Stephen Kantrowitz's examination of abolitionist manhood and concluding with Thomas J. Brown's study of Southerners' memorialization of male and female wartime activity, leading the reader through the many gendered dilemmas that the Civil War's social, cultural, political, and military circumstances brought to the fore. The collection of essays also lends itself to thematic arrangement. Works by Elizabeth Leonard, Vir-

ginia Gould, Catherine Clinton, and Jim Downs provide commentary on societal acceptance or rejection of “public” women while contributions by Stephen Kantrowitz, John Stauffer, Lisa Cardyn, Anne Rubin, and Thomas Brown deal with the evolving definitions of masculinity and womanhood and the ultimate retrenchment of antebellum gender norms.

Elizabeth Leonard’s article, “Mary Walker, Mary Surrat, and Some Thoughts on Gender in the Civil War,” complements Clinton and Silber’s introductory comments on the state of scholarship on Civil War gender studies. Leonard’s piece offers insight into one of the field’s fundamental questions: “what sorts of contributions did women make to the war effort on both sides of the front, and what were the long-term implications for gender conventions of women’s wartime activities” (p. 104). Leonard’s examination of both the lives and historical treatment of Mary Walker and Mary Surrat reveals that both Civil War contemporaries and early scholars were discomfited by the way these women challenged Victorian gender norms. Walker and Surrat, as Leonard interestingly notes, behaved “badly,” Walker by having horribly good success in the medical field and Surrat by her cunning participation in Lincoln’s assassination plot. The lessons that Leonard gleans from the lives of Walker and Surrat speak to the larger experience of women in the Civil War. After nineteenth-century American society (as well as some earlier scholars) admonished these women for stepping outside the accepted bounds of femininity, historians and a good number of nineteenth-century citizens brought the lives of these women back into the public sphere to honor good deeds (in Walker’s case) and to reconsider the harsh treatment of the fair sex (in Surrat’s case).

Essays by Virginia Gould, Catherine Clinton, and Jim Downs also explore Civil War society’s willingness to accept or proclivity to denounce “public” women. Gould’s piece, “‘Oh I Pass Everywhere’: Catholic Nuns in the Gulf South during the Civil War,” shows how religious orders, such as the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of St. Joseph, and the Sisters of the Holy Family, continued to practice their Catholic worldview during wartime and consequently won the respect of both Union and Confederate soldiers. The Catholic nuns had a history of practicing social activism animated by charity, love, and a desire to educate the public. These everyday acts continued into the Civil War and motivated the nuns to engage in caring for the Union and Confederate dead and wounded. Gould poignantly demonstrates how these acts, which the nuns wrapped “within the language and behavior of piety and

fervor,” earned the sisters an acceptable role in the public sphere, increased their mobility during wartime, and stimulated an upsurge in commitment to the religious orders in the postwar years (p. 55).

While the religious sisters in Gould’s essay used their gender roles for their own advancement, Union and Confederate men in Clinton’s piece, “‘Public Women’ and Sexual Politics in the American Civil War,” engaged in smear campaigns to correct “public women’s” misbehavior. Clinton’s article examines female dissent against the Confederate government in Richmond, Virginia in 1863; and against the Union army in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1862 and in Roswell, Georgia in 1864. Ultimately, Clinton’s work demonstrates that, to some Union and Confederate officials, the war’s social disruption was enough and that women who dared to challenge the confines of womanhood during wartime deserved swift reprimand.

Southern women in Clinton’s essay protested wartime conditions and consequently elicited negative stereotypes from male authorities. Similarly, newly emancipated African American women in Jim Downs’s piece, “The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and Their Children during and after the Civil War,” shows how the Federal government’s wartime and postwar plans (1862-67) for former slaves excluded women. As a result, African American women entered the South’s new free labor system with little chance for employment and a high probability of dependency. This situation, in Down’s estimation, evidences how the lack of government aid forced newly freed black women into situations that caused many citizens to characterize them as idle, insane, or a threat to Reconstruction’s objectives.

“Public women” were not the only people under attack during the Civil War and postwar years. The war additionally created situations that questioned previously acceptable notions of manhood and womanhood. Stephen Kantrowitz and John Stauffer respectively consider embattled concepts of manhood among abolitionists and New England writers during the Civil War era. Kantrowitz’s article, “Fighting Like Men: Civil War Dilemmas of Abolitionist Manhood,” views the war as an opportunity for white and black abolitionists alike to prove their manhood. These Massachusetts men sought to express themselves in different ways. While black abolitionists wanted, and eventually achieved, citizenship through inclusion in the militia, white abolitionists desired to define themselves as “outsiders, criminals, and members of a vast conspiracy against an unjust republic”

(p. 26). Kantrowitz ultimately contends that the Civil War represented a peak in African Americans' struggle for rights that significantly declined in the postwar years. Stauffer's article, "Embattled Manhood and New England Writers, 1860-1870," demonstrates a similar phenomenon with different subjects. The author examines male writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John William DeForest in addition to female writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, and Louisa May Alcott to reveal the rise of female authors, and consequently feminine virtues, during the Civil War and their subsequent fall during Reconstruction as American culture became increasingly masculinized.

Anne Rubin's essay, "Politics and Petticoats in the Same Pod: Florence Fay, Betsey Bittersweet, and the Reconstruction of Southern Womanhood, 1865-1868," also hints at the masculinization of postwar culture. Fay and Bittersweet, (allegedly) female writers, utilized distinctly masculine language, humor, and tone in their newspaper columns to prescribe proper female behavior and urge continued animosity towards the Federal government. Although Rubin's work evidences the idea that postwar culture favored a return to traditional gender norms, she argues that the fact that these women writers exhibited the ability to comment on issues of public significance "signaled an expansion, however slight, of women's purview during the tumult of Reconstruction" (p. 185). While Rubin's work focuses on women's agency during Reconstruction, Lisa Cardyn's piece, "Sex-

ual Terror in the Reconstruction South," considers how the Ku Klux Klan's ability to frequently exercise sexual terror against freedwomen represented a continuation of the slave South's sexual power dynamics in the postwar years. Cardyn's work historicizes sexual terror by considering these crimes in accordance with other factors such as race, gender, and sexual oppression in hopes of understanding and ultimately overcoming its horrific legacy.

Just as the legacy of Reconstruction's sexual terror remains incomplete, so too does a full appreciation of gender's relationship to the Civil War. Thomas J. Brown's article, "The Confederate Retreat to Mars and Venus," speaks to the idea that gender is a subject of inquiry that remains open to competing, alternate, and new interpretations. Brown's study of South Carolinians' postwar efforts to memorialize its male and female citizens' wartime actions argues that the Civil War sharpened rather than blurred distinctions between men and women. Friction between South Carolina's men and women, in addition to their competing conceptions of manhood and womanhood, speaks to contemporary scholars' efforts to more fully understand how the Civil War and Reconstruction shaped gender roles, expectations, and ideologies. Clinton and Silber's work is admittedly not the definitive study of gender in the Civil War. Rather, the book continues in the tradition of *Divided Houses* since it reveals how far the field has come in the past decade and how far it has yet to go.

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Citation: Angela M. Zombek. Review of Silber, Nina, *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

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