

Priscilla Bond. *A Maryland Bride in the Deep South: The Civil War Diary of Priscilla Bond.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. xvi + 384 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3143-5.



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From Home to Homefront

Women's diaries are essential sources for the field of women's history and, as Mary Boykin Chesnut has long attested, to Civil War history as well. For all researchers, diaries and other personal writings provide an individual human perspective on the past. Without them, we could neither develop nor test the broader characterizations of history. A "Civil War diary" has added implicit suspense for the reader who knows what is looming from the outset—things will happen, however mundanely the diarist first takes up her pen. From the work of historians such as Drew Gilpin Faust (*Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South and the American Civil War* [1996]) and George Rable (*Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* [1989]), we may predict that the experience of war deeply unsettled any Southern woman's life.[1] It even perhaps disturbed her fundamental beliefs and ideas. Such was the case for Priscilla ("Mittie") Munnikhuysen Bond (1838-1866), who faced challenges beyond anything she had imagined during her sheltered girlhood in antebellum Maryland.

Mittie's two surviving diaries, covering 1858 to 1865,

trace her transplantation from her beloved Maryland to Louisiana, where her new husband brought her just before the Civil War erupted. The first years' entries provide a record of social engagements, deaths within her circle, her frail health, and her remorse over her own sinfulness. Mittie struggled with the decision whether to marry her wealthy distant cousin, Howard Bond of Louisiana. Despite their strong affection for one another, Mittie dreaded the separation from her family that such a marriage would entail: "*Can I, Oh! Can I leave my home for one so far away!*" (p. 120). She also worried about the inconstancy of romantic love. The couple wed at last in January 1861 and set out for Howard's family plantation. There Bond began to navigate an unfamiliar culture, including a system in which slaves were more prominent and more brutally mistreated than she ever saw in Maryland. She clashed with her husband's parents, and even with her husband, over such matters as the proper management of slaves. She sought a church to attend and continued to struggle with sickness and physical weakness.

On the 4th of July, 1861, Bond announced that “War! Civil War! is upon us, in all its horrors” (p. 201). Sometimes months passed between entries in her diary, yet she continued to write candidly of her thoughts, feelings, and relationships while diligently recording the effects of war on her community. Southern Louisiana “felt [the war] intensely;” the Union gained control of New Orleans in April 1862 but encountered military resistance from Confederate troops, guerillas, and planters for over a year afterward (p. 38). Union troops burned Crescent Place, the Bonds’ large sugar plantation and home, in retaliation for Howard’s supposed role in an earlier ambush. Mittie describes their deprivations under Union occupation, fears of pillaging Jayhawkers, soaring prices and scarcity of material necessities. She usually had to rely on her own resources with Howard away fighting or simply hiding from Union scouts. Like her husband’s family, Bond embraced the Confederate cause, although she almost never mentioned the ideological or political motivations for secession. Throughout, Bond maintained a staunch identification as a Southerner and as a Methodist as well as strong sense of connection with her family back in Maryland. Even during the most troubled times, she also remained an avid reader. Her tastes ranged from popular novels to published autobiographies, that is, from Walter Scott and *The Lamplighter* to Susan Allibone’s memoir, *A Life Hid with Christ in God* and Mary Day’s *Incidents in the Life of a Blind Girl*. (See appendix 2 for the list she kept of books read.)

Editor Kimberly Harrison presents Bond’s diary entries in their entirety “to keep her voice clear” (p. 45). At the same time, Harrison provides the additional layer of information that readers will need to decode and contextualize Bond’s references and reactions. Thus one can easily identify names and events through the judicious footnotes, family trees, and the biographical section on “Principal Friends and Family” in each geographical location. The introduction identifies the many topics that this diary engages: histories of the family, courtship and marriage, evangelical religion, slaveholding, and medical practices. Harrison draws from recent scholarship in each of these areas (e.g., by Joan Cashin and Cynthia Lysterly) and compares Bond with other diarists (albeit only Southern female contemporaries) to offer historical perspective on Bond’s experiences and observations.

Harrison, who is an assistant professor of English and directs an undergraduate writing center at Florida International University, regards Bond’s diary not only as historical evidence but also individual self-expression. For example, Harrison offers two ways to consider Bond’s

accounts of her ill health. Her attacks of neuralgia, and later consumption, comprised a physical reality of pain and debility. At the same time complaints of debility gave Bond a socially acceptable way “to excuse herself from social routines and responsibilities, especially when she was depressed or upset” (p. 36). According to Harrison, the diary itself functioned primarily as a tool for Bond to define herself, her identity, and her ideals—not as a simple daily record of occurrences. Bond was surely influenced by the spiritual autobiographies she read and sought evidence of God’s tests and grace in the shape of her own life.

Harrison’s close attention to language illuminates the more subtle traces of Bond’s inner life. Bond never questioned slavery as an institution. Though shocked by the style of slavery in Louisiana (as compared to Maryland), she never doubted the morality of a compassionate, Christian attitude toward one’s slaves. Her attitudes did change, though, judging from the increasing frequency of command words in her descriptions of relationships with slaves during the Civil War (p. 29). Harrison argues that in fact, Bond’s own sympathies toward her slaves decreased over time and that she also perhaps grew numb to the violence of war (p. 39). She notes other important shifts as well; religion, which seemed to give Bond a language for self-chastisement in Maryland, became her main source of comfort in war-torn Louisiana.

Though Bond never wrote explicitly about the political aspects of the war, nor did she wish for a more active role for herself in the conflict, Harrison shows how during wartime “her understanding of true womanhood changed” (p. 16). The starting point for this transformation is not the homosocial “female world” described in the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Barbara Welter, Nancy Cott, and other pioneers of gender history who first researched New England. Bond’s friendships with men (especially cousins) seems an indication of her cultural Southernness, even in Maryland—a different nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood that urged young women to act the gracious, vivacious “belle,” then mature after marriage into the more reserved “lady.”^[2] The masculine counterpart to the Southern woman was the chivalrous patriarch. Yet Bond, and other Southern women, witnessed all too clearly the failure of male protection during the Civil War. Confederate men’s absence, defeat, or mere drunkenness (noted often by Bond) violated their duty and dissolved the mutual obligations of men and women to each other. Though Harrison does not draw attention to it, one is struck by the authority that Bond assumed in managing the family finances during

the absence of her husband and father-in-law—not only selling calico and other domestic goods, but also becoming a self-styled “sugar speculator.” As the war ended, Bond expressed her real fear that her husband had abandoned her to seek refuge for himself in Mexico. “I took off my wedding ring to day,” she wrote angrily. “It almost felt like a snake around my finger. If *he* has gone to protect His own life at the expense of *mine* I say I have no farther use for *such a man*” (p. 338).

Howard proved true; he arrived several days later, ready to accompany his wife to Maryland to see the dear family from whom she had been separated for so long. Yet perhaps the ultimate gender reversal is that we know of the others in Mittie’s community, including Howard, most vividly through her. Rather than glean- ing the wife’s story from her husband’s, we glimpse his through hers. One wishes that Harrison had dwelled longer on the puzzles or anomalies that Bond presents, such as her firm and deliberate avoidance of pregnancy or her distrust of romantic love. Harrison also neglects to explain what else may lie in the Priscilla Munnikhuysen Bond Papers at the Louisiana State University Libraries

in Baton Rouge; in fact, she references no unpublished manuscripts in the bibliography. Bond’s diary is not itself a new discovery, but Harrison has made it an accessible, and thus valuable, source for those interested in histories of women, the old South, and the Civil War. It beautifully illustrates the perceptions and meanings of the Civil War from a significant point of view. May it also stimulate interest in other voices that remain in the archives, awaiting an intermediary.

Notes

[1]. See also LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

[2]. Michael O’Brien, introduction to *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827-67*, ed. Michael O’Brien (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 24-26; and Anne Goodwyn Jones, “Belles and Ladies,” in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1527-1530.

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