



Diane Eickhoff. *Revolutionary Heart: The Life of Clarina Nichols and the Pioneering Crusade for Women's Rights.* Kansas City: Quindaro Press, 2006. 277 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9764434-4-5.



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“An Unjustly Overlooked Pioneer of the Women’s Rights Movement”: The Life of Clarina I. H. Nichols

Reformer Clarina I. H. Nichols was not only a prolific journalist and a tireless advocate for the causes of temperance, abolition, and women’s rights, but also, as Diane Eickhoff demonstrates in her new biography of Nichols, *Revolutionary Heart*, a remarkably shrewd and skillful storyteller. Nichols understood the power that stories about individual women’s sorrows, struggles, and sufferings had to inspire greater understanding in audiences about the gender inequities which permeated nineteenth-century American society. “Whenever she spoke before a group or wrote an article for a newspaper, Nichols included stories that illustrated injustice,” Eickhoff writes. “Stories, she discovered, touched hearts, and she used them to animate the cases of injustice she brought to light” (p. 9).

Much like her subject, Eickhoff is an assured writer and a gifted storyteller, who brings both Nichols and her era to vivid and compelling life in this concise and lively biography. Intended for a general as well as for a scholarly audience, *Revolutionary Heart* maintains that historians’ current understandings of woman’s rights activism and ideology during the nineteenth century is incomplete without a consideration of the influential and prolific Nichols’ life and work. With this biography, Eick-

hoff thus contributes to historians’ ongoing efforts to reshape overly simplistic narratives about the antebellum woman’s rights movement, which, despite years of sophisticated and insightful scholarship, persist in both high school and college textbooks and classrooms. Like recent works focusing on such significant (but all too often neglected) antebellum feminists as Caroline W. Healey Dall and Jane Grey Swisshelm, Eickhoff’s biography challenges historical narratives that focus too narrowly on canonical figures such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and discuss antebellum feminism primarily as a prelude to the post-Civil War suffrage movement.[1] By restoring Nichols, an “unjustly overlooked pioneer of the women’s movement,” to the historical narrative, *Revolutionary Heart* enriches existing understandings about the development of the woman’s rights movement, and woman’s rights discourse, in the antebellum United States (p. 10).[2]

Born in Vermont in 1810, Nichols grew up in the midst of the fierce religious revivals taking place in New England during the 1820s and 1830s. Joining the Baptist Church at the age of eight, Nichols was an ardent reader of the Bible throughout her childhood, a pursuit which served her in good stead later in life, when she used her extensive knowledge of scripture to counter the arguments of anti-woman’s rights clergymen. A sharply

intelligent and intellectually restless young woman, Clara informed her father that “if he had to choose between giving her a fine dowry or an education, she wanted more schooling” (p. 20). After her education was completed, Nichols worked as a teacher near her childhood home.

In 1830, Nichols married Justin Carpenter, an aimless young man with a law degree and no particular ambitions. The marriage was not a happy one: Nichols was constantly struggling to support herself, her husband, and later their three children through her work as a teacher and a writer, and suffered both physical and emotional abuse from her husband. These experiences, Eickhoff argues, made Nichols painfully aware of the ways in which women were systematically disempowered in American society. Stripped of all rights after marriage and presented with very limited employment opportunities, American women, Nichols realized, faced significant obstacles to realizing their intellectual potential, obtaining economic independence, and finding a voice within the “public sphere” of politics and reform.

Nichols began to express her ideas about the need for radical social reform in American society in print during the early 1840s, when she became a contributor to the Vermont newspaper *Windham County Democrat*. Writing articles and editorials that spoke out in favor of the causes of temperance, abolition, and women’s rights, Nichols transformed the *Democrat* into a staunchly pro-reform paper. She used her sharp wit and considerable literary skills to write powerful, persuasive pieces calling for women’s rights to their property, children, and wages. In 1843, she obtained a divorce from her husband, subsequently remarrying the editor of the *Democrat*, George Nichols. George Nichols became seriously ill soon after their marriage, and Nichols quietly (but increasingly confidently) took over her husband’s editorial duties.

During the 1850s, Eickhoff argues, Nichols was one of the chief architects of the emerging women’s rights movement. She organized and spoke at several of the national conventions held during this decade, delivering one of the era’s most popular and influential speeches, “On the Responsibilities of Woman,” at the Worcester Woman’s Rights Convention in 1851. In this speech, Nichols argued that women needed more rights in American society so that they could better carry out their feminine responsibilities to their husbands, children, and communities. Such arguments were, Eickhoff maintains, in part the expression of a genuine belief on Nichols’ part, in women’s unique and gender-specific obligations and

duties, and in part a shrewd rhetorical strategy, designed to appeal to audience members skeptical about the desirability of women’s rights. In the years after delivering this speech, Eickhoff details, Nichols gradually moved away from this more conservative rhetoric, making increasingly radical calls for women’s rights on the basis of their status as individuals and citizens, rather than as their roles as wives and mothers.

Throughout the 1850s, Nichols continued her career as an activist lecturer, traveling throughout the country giving speeches on behalf of temperance, women’s rights, and the Republican Party. In 1859, she was a key participant in the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention in Kansas. Although her gender barred her from openly addressing the all-male assembly, Nichols attended convention meetings faithfully (alternating, observers noted approvingly, between decorous sewing and quiet note-taking), and lobbied convention participants ceaselessly, urging them to give women greater rights under Kansas’ new constitution. (She was eventually able to persuade conference participants to allow her to speak to them about women’s rights in an unofficial, after-hours conference session, which was both well attended and well received by delegates.) Largely through Nichols’ efforts, Eickhoff demonstrates, the constitution which the convention produced granted women greater rights than they had previously enjoyed in Kansas, including the ability to vote in school elections, new educational opportunities, and increased rights to their property and children in cases of divorce.

Active on behalf of the Union during the Civil War, after the war ended, Nichols threw herself wholeheartedly into suffrage advocates’ fierce (but ultimately unsuccessful) campaign for women’s suffrage in Kansas during the late 1860s. Disheartened after the defeat of this campaign, Nichols moved to California in the early 1870s, there continuing her work as a journalist and advocate for women’s rights and other humanitarian reforms.

Thoroughly situating Nichols in the political, social, and religious context of her era, *Revolutionary Heart* would be a useful text in undergraduate courses on nineteenth-century and women’s history. Although the volume contains no footnotes, the notes section at the end of the volume provides brief, useful summaries of the secondary sources relevant for each chapter, and detailed citations of each chapter’s specific references and quotations. The volume also contains several valuable appendices, including a brief excerpt from Nichols’ writings and a concise overview of the antebellum woman’s

rights movement. The excerpt from Nichols' journalism is particularly intriguing, as it gives the reader the opportunity to more fully appreciate Nichols' powerful and witty rhetorical style. It is to be hoped that the excerpt of Nichols' writing which Eickhoff includes in her volume, and the extensive quotations which she includes from Nichols throughout, will inspire a new scholarly edition of her writings and speeches, so that Nichols' work will be more readily accessible to scholars.

At the end of her long and eventful life, Nichols expressed regret that she had never found the time to write her autobiography. "What a book," Nichols lamented in her diary in 1880, "I might have given to my dear children, relatives, and personal friends" (p. 207). Although Nichols died before she could realize her ambition of writing her own life story, Eickhoff's engaging, insightful biography will ensure that the accomplishments of this dynamic and important reformer will no longer be overlooked.

Notes

[1]. Important recent works of scholarship focused on re-evaluating and complicating traditional narratives concerning the antebellum woman's rights movement in-

clude Helen Deese, *Daughter of Boston: The Extraordinary Diary of a Nineteenth-Century Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Jane Grey Swisshelm: An Unconventional Life, 1815-1884* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Sylvia D. Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); John F. McClymer, ed., *This High and Holy Moment: The First National Woman's Rights Convention, Worcester, 1850* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace College, 1999); and Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[2]. The work of historian Marilyn Schultz Blackwell is also of vital importance in reconsidering Nichols's role within the reform movements of the antebellum era. See Marilyn Schultz Blackwell, "Meddling in Politics: Clarina Howard Nichols and Antebellum Political Culture," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Spring 2004): 27-63.

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