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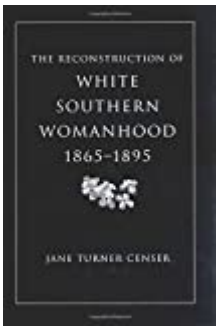

Jane Turner Censer. *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. xv + 280 pp. $25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-2921-0; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2907-4.

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Farewell to Belledom

White southern women are a tricky lot. Women's historians often have ambivalent feelings towards this group. On the one hand is the tendency to applaud all increase in power and agency as part of the general project of women's history to uncover and celebrate the buried realities of women's lives. On the other hand is the unfortunate reality that white women of the South often used their power and agency to oppress women of other classes and races. White northern women were also, of course, complicit in various kinds of oppression, but they seem to fit more smoothly into a narrative of righteous struggle while spearheading the fight for suffrage, Progressive reform, and labor activism.

Jane Turner Censer's new book, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood*, makes the case that elite white southern women too worked to cast off their previous restrictions and expand women's possibilities in the public sphere. This argument is a return to Anne Firor Scott's contention twenty-seven years ago that southern women after the Civil War expanded beyond their traditional roles. In recent years scholars such as Drew Gilpin Faust and LeeAnn Whites have argued that either this foray into a wider sphere was temporary or in the service of malevolent racial politics. Censer's chronological scope helps bridge the gap between these disparate views by extending her study to 1895. Indeed, the "first generation" of women Censer identifies, those born before 1820, fit Faust's model and were less able to adapt to the changing world. However, the second and third generations, those born between 1820-49 and 1850-69, were much more capable and even eager to try new paths of increased education, paid careers, and new lifestyles. Censer's argument about women's increased opportunities and more independent self-definition is convincing and a welcome addition to the scholarly literature.

The book draws upon an impressive body of research, making effective use of the case study by restricting its view to Virginia and North Carolina. This choice allows the author to delve deeply into women's published and unpublished writings, primary sources about women in both states, and pertinent writings of other prominent white southern women. On occasion, Censer narrows the lens even further by taking an intensely detailed view of three counties: Craven County, North Carolina, a cot-

ton economy; New Hanover County, North Carolina, a rice growing region; and Fauquier County, Virginia that utilized mixed farming. This approach gives Censer the ability to closely track property records and family inheritance patterns to shed light on the business habits of wealthy families. Censer gracefully uses her mountains of evidence to show definite patterns emerging in women's lives, and she skillfully inserts personal anecdotes and quotes to give the reader a sense of individual women's hopes and dreams.

Censer begins by showing that white elite women, particularly the younger generation, were more educated, less sheltered in private homes, and more willing to be independent of men. The next chapter makes a contention that seems counterintuitive on the surface: women increased their domesticity which led to an increased sense of independence. Yet the reasoning is compelling. Instead of ornamental belles who directed slave labor, these newer generations of women after the Civil War rolled up their sleeves and learned new skills. Though the older generation never seemed to recover from emancipation and the 13th amendment, a point that reinforces Faust's work, the younger women could cook, sew, and raise vegetables and poultry; they also took pride in their household accomplishments. Censer never makes an explicit comparison to northern women, but it is worth mentioning that many historians credit northern women's consolidation of power in the domestic sphere with their eventual foray into the public one.

The third chapter reflects the strength of the intensive case study by charting a gradual increase in women's property holdings and entry into business dealings. Censer clearly shows women gaining more power in the business arena by acting as executors of their husband's wills, managing separate estates, taking in boarders, and inheriting more property as parents increasingly split their equity amongst all children regardless of gender. Future scholars would do well to investigate whether this trend is a quirk of the Upper South or representative of the larger region. Chapter 4 demonstrates that elite women had a hand in plantation management and greatly influenced both the preservation of family homes and the trend of wealthy families to abandon the old estates in the countryside for a more lively life in the city.

The meatiest argument, that women were indelibly changing their prescribed roles in life, surfaces with Censer's discussion of women in public. According to Censer, "the most striking changes for women of the old elite in the postwar South came in their access to and activities outside their homes" (p. 153). School teaching was the largest example of this trend. Censer makes a convincing point that after the war women stumbled into teaching from necessity, while younger generations explicitly trained and chose their education with an eye to a teaching career. The rich tapestry of sources makes for lively reading. My favorite example was Fanny Dabney, a woman from an elite family interested in getting a start as a governess. She is excited to get an invitation from relatives with young children to live with them, but after a few weeks without pay began to wonder how to broach the awkward question of whether she was considered a governess or just an extremely helpful guest. This anecdote demonstrates the uncertainty many elite women faced about how exactly to dive into the new realm of work.

In addition to informal family arrangements, more women began to attend normal schools in the South and northern women's colleges as well as beginning to work long-term in private and public schools. Censer argues that this teaching trend is an important benchmark that "marks the emergence of a new ethic in the South–one that praised economic self-support and independence among women" (pp. 179-180). The author documents her argument with a wealth of examples, and takes care not to oversell her analysis. She includes women who were disillusioned and frustrated with their teaching careers, showing that women's path to public paid employment was not always smooth and fulfilling. In addition to teaching, southern elite women were also more active in churches by teaching Sunday school, doing mission work, and organizing fundraisers, respectable activities that continued women's foray into public space.

Elite women also began to work memorializing the Confederate dead. This trend has been documented by Glenda Gilmore and LeeAnn Whites, both of whom point out that white women helped to create the myth of the Lost Cause that undergirded the resurgence of white supremacy in the South.[1] But Censer argues that, in the early postwar years, women were initially doing politically neutral work sorting through mass graveyards containing unidentified dead bodies, a form of "civic housekeeping" responding to a real problem. Ladies Memorial Associations would locate sites, try to identify bodies, and move them into proper cemeteries. Censer concludes that "at their inception, the societies' annual decoration of graves played a relatively small role compared to the women's desire to order and sanitize the presence of death in their midst" (p. 195). This may be so, but it does not escape the harsh reality that over time,

these memorial celebrations became a bedrock of noxious racial politics.

The last two chapters document elite southern white women's writing in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Passionately denouncing the fact that postbellum southern women writers were largely ignored at the time and are currently given short shrift by literary scholars, Censer shows the breadth of their writing and ambition by tracing the daring foray many women took into the unknown world of publishing. The content of elite southern women's writing is fascinating to learn. Unlike the expectation that southern white women valorized the Confederacy from the moment of surrender, Censer shows that in the 1870s and 1880s white women wrote romances with northern men drawn as wealthy, sexy, capable suitors in contrast to lazy and ineffective southern beaus. Censer thinks these tales reflected southern women's willingness to be critical of southern men in particular and the Southern region at large, a new perspective on the "Romance of Reunion."

Disturbingly, by the 1890s southern women shifted their literary sketches to include increased criticism of the North, valorization of the Confederacy, and rising racial rancor. Censer insists that though white women "adopted and used the stereotypes of the day" they did so "more slowly and sometimes more kindly than southern men" (p. 244). Censer claims it is only later in the century that "women's use of racial stereotyping had definitely increased and had become less distinctive from southern male writing" (p. 244). Additionally, Censer emphasizes that "southern white female authors did not pioneer either the plantation myth or the image of blacks as beast-rapists, notions that were gaining ground in the 1890s" (p. 274). Instead of innovating these trends, Censer argues, women only followed in the path of prominent male authors such as Thomas Nelson Page.

By defaulting blame to Page, Censer sidesteps wrestling with the thorny question of white southern women's complicity in creating, maintaining, and benefiting from white supremacy. Throughout her otherwise excellent book, Censer tends to highlight elite women's agency when they are involved in something admirable, like improving their managerial skills in running plantations, taking the initiative to start a school, or risking public censure to write a novel with innovative themes. In such realms, Censer insists, women were striking out independently and deserve recognition. But when white women became involved in unsavory activities such as memorializing the Lost Cause or trafficking in literary racism, Censer soft-pedals women's power and suggests they were merely imitating the men of their day. This evasion does a disservice to the main project of the book, which is to take women's lives seriously and grant them responsibility for the choices they made.

Overall, however, this is an excellent book that sorely fills an important gap in the existing scholarship. The research is impressive, with nuts-and-bolts figures on inheritance mingled with wonderfully revealing anecdotes that give a window into the inner lives of elite southern white women. Censer succeeds in documenting that women increased their opportunities in education, improved their access to property and business dealings, developed novel skills in the domestic realm, increased visibility in public space, tackled new career opportunities, and broadened their vision of white southern womanhood by writing for public consumption. It is key reading for women's and southern historians.

Note

[1]. Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 95; and LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 160-198.

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