

Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints

Barbara Cutter

University of Northern Iowa

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Cutter, Barbara. "Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 90-92.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12551>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

This book—the most recent compilation of edited primary source material from Lincoln scholar Michael Burlingame—contains annotated transcriptions of all newspaper dispatches written by New York reporter Henry Villard from Springfield, Illinois, from November 10, 1860, to February 11, 1861, reporting the activities of president-elect Abraham Lincoln for the *New York Herald*, *Cincinnati Commercial*, and *San Francisco Bulletin*. Villard's reports document the scramble for patronage posts and cabinet appointments that consumed the time and attention of mid-nineteenth-century politicians and commentators. An appendix includes Villard's reports on the 1858 Illinois senatorial contest between Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, wherein Villard's pro-Douglas bias is evident in his disparaging observations regarding Lincoln and other Republicans.

Students of Iowa history will find that relative to office seekers from other states, Iowans were relatively modest in their badgering of the president-elect. Only two Iowa delegations are reported to have traveled to Springfield, both in support of fellow Iowan Fitz Henry Warren, whose quest to become Postmaster General proved unsuccessful. Iowa Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood made an obligatory call on Lincoln, as did Lee County's Hawkins Taylor, an old Lincoln friend and ally. Villard's account of an Iowa office seeker too inept to impress his name in the memory of Lincoln and his associates illustrates his easterner's condescending attitude toward midwestern people and culture. Scholars looking for evidence of a general sense of eastern regional superiority will find it in both the general tenor of Villard's dispatches and in specific examples.

Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints, edited by Judith Giesberg and Randall M. Miller. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2018. xviii, 358 pp. Illustration, notes, index. \$49.95 paperback.

Reviewer Barbara Cutter is associate professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. She is the author of *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels: The Radicalism of American Womanhood, 1830–1865* (2003).

Historical scholarship on women and the American Civil War has proliferated in the past 30 years. As Judith Giesberg and Randall M. Miller note, this scholarship has become increasingly diverse in recent years, expanding to focus on the experiences of Northern and Southern women, black and white, immigrant and native born, elite, middle class and working class, and rural and urban. Yet, as they point out, the scholarship overall is still “regionally segregated.” “Historians writing about Southern women rarely comment on or interact with those working on

the North, and vice versa" (xi). The editors' goal with this collection, *Women and the American Civil War*, is to open up a conversation between scholars of Northern and Southern women to start the process of breaking down this regional divide. Specifically, they "pair" two essays—one on Northern women and the other on Southern women—in eight topic areas of the history of the Civil War era: politics, wartime mobilization, emancipation, wartime relief, women and families, religion, Reconstruction, and Civil War memory. The essays themselves are largely synthetic accounts of the historical scholarship on a topic area.

While this book review cannot do justice to the arguments of 16 authors on 8 topics, some examples may convey a sense of the volume. In the "politics" topic, for example, Elizabeth R. Varon's essay, "Southern Women and Politics in the Civil War Era," points out just how politically active Southern women (both black and white, Union and Confederate) were during the Civil War era, and she suggests that scholars should "define politics broadly, to include not only electoral politics but a variety of battles for social authority" (19). Stacey M. Robertson's piece, "'All Ladies Have Politics': Women, Morality and Politics in the North," focuses on the important political roles played by Northern female abolitionists to make a similar point: "We need to broaden our understanding of the 'political' to include activities and communications beyond traditional partisan boundaries" (35). In "Emancipation," Rebecca Capobianco, in "Southern Women and Emancipation during the Civil War," suggests that scholars should expand their understanding of the meaning of emancipation during the war. Instead of only focusing on enslaved people who left their masters, scholars could also explore the "ways in which black women sought to establish some measure of 'freedom' even as they remained enslaved" (95). Chandra Manning, in the paired piece, "Northern Women and Emancipation," focuses on Northern women who went south to work with formerly enslaved people in an effort to "make emancipation real" (115). She suggests what made their experience different from other Northern women—which scholars have overlooked—was that they inevitably "came face to face with failure" (111). That is, the problems facing the formerly enslaved people were too large to be solved given prejudice and the resources allotted for the task. Acknowledging that failure, she argues, made Northern women (black and white) "more likely to see differences between freed people and themselves as sensible adaptations to learn from rather than defects" (113). She suggests that scholars should, first, more carefully distinguish between Northern women's work with formerly enslaved people and other types of war work; and, second, pay attention to the transformative nature of emancipation work.

The overall importance of this collection lies in its effort to connect the experiences of women in Civil War America across the sectional divide. In many cases, however, the paired essays make few such connections, so it is not clear how reading the essays together would facilitate scholars' thinking across regional boundaries more than would reading existing scholarship on both regions. Many of the essays—especially in the topic areas of politics, wartime mobilization, wartime relief, and one of the emancipation essays—have substantial topical overlap. The separation of wartime mobilization and wartime relief was particularly puzzling: as the editors themselves note, the distinction between them “seems rather a fine one” (xiv). Combining existing topic areas could have also created space for additional topics in the collection, such as sexuality and masculinity. Nonetheless, having all these essays in a single volume is a convenience. The book should be of interest to scholars and graduate students working on women in the Civil War era. Readers of the *Annals of Iowa* may be particularly interested in Nichole Etcherson's essay, “Women and Family at Home in the North,” because of her use of primary sources from Iowa and other midwestern states.

Practical Liberators: Union Officers in the Western Theater during the Civil War, by Kristopher A. Teters. Civil War America series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 225 pp. Notes on methodology, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Robert Wooster is Regents Professor of History at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi. His books include *American Military Frontiers: The U.S. Army in the West, 1783–1900* (2009) and *The Civil War Bookshelf: 50 Must-Read Books about the War Between the States* (2001).

Since the 1950s, scholars have devoted considerable attention to the attitudes and actions of the Union Army regarding the confiscation and emancipation of slaves. In this first study to focus exclusively on Union officers in the western theater, Kristopher A. Teters concludes that “pragmatism, far more than morality, motivated western officers to support emancipation” (2). In so doing, Teters positions himself firmly in the camp of historians Bell Irvin Wiley, Louis Gerteis, Mark Grimsley, and Gary Gallagher, all of whom have said much the same thing. Thoroughly researched and entirely convincing, *Practical Liberators* surely establishes this interpretation as representing the consensus among professional historians.

As the author explains, most western officers initially insisted that they were fighting to save the Union, not to end slavery. Following the