

Born Criminal: Matilda Joslyn Gage, Radical Suffragist

Sara Egge

Centre College, Danville Kentucky

ISSN 0003-4827

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

Recommended Citation

Egge, Sara. "Born Criminal: Matilda Joslyn Gage, Radical Suffragist." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 407-409.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol78/iss4/13>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

this rule comes when Carmichael discusses how the two sides reacted to defeat. In their letters home, Union soldiers displayed an ability to acknowledge their military failures while maintaining their belief that their cause would eventually prevail. Confederates, on the other hand, rarely admitted to a defeat, no matter how significant a setback they had experienced. Moreover, while Union soldiers could usually give their enemy grudging praise for their fighting prowess, up to the end of the war Confederates usually disparaged the martial skills of the Federals. Carmichael suggests that this may have stemmed from Southern white males having to preserve a sense of superiority over others that allowed them to justify their subjugation of people of color.

The War for the Common Soldier is a thought-provoking work, but it will undoubtedly fail to impress every Civil War enthusiast. Some, for example, will feel that any book that tells the story of only 20 Civil War soldiers cannot serve as a valid interpretation of "the common soldier." Others—especially those who feel that Civil War historians often overlook the vital contribution to the eventual Union victory played by Federal forces operating west of the Appalachians—may find fault with Carmichael's choice to look only at soldiers who fought in the Eastern theater. Finally, even though by the end of the conflict the Army of the Potomac included thousands of immigrants and African Americans, none of their stories appear in *The War for the Common Soldier*. Still, Carmichael deserves high marks for producing a thought-provoking book on the mental machinations of combatants caught up in our nation's bloodiest conflict. One can only hope that similar in-depth analyses of those groups not included in his book will soon appear.

Born Criminal: Matilda Joslyn Gage, Radical Suffragist, by Angelica Shirley Carpenter. Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2018. xiv, 284 pp. Maps, illustrations, family tree, notes, bibliography, appendix. \$19.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Sara Egge is Claude D. Pottinger Professor of History at Centre College. She is the author of *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920* (2018).

According to Angelica Shirley Carpenter, Matilda Joslyn Gage ought to have a marble bust in the U.S. Capitol alongside those of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. That trio worked diligently for woman suffrage, yet Anthony and Stanton receive praise as the primary national leaders of the nineteenth century. Yet, as Carpenter reveals, Gage was a principal figure whose work and legacy her so-called friends actively wrote out of history. Carpenter tackles the curious

questions about why they did so in her biography of Gage titled *Born Criminal: Matilda Joslyn Gage, Radical Suffragist*.

The title is important as it signals two key tenets of Gage's self-identity. First, Gage argued that women had the same rights as criminals did. Their only offense was their birth as women. The notion of being born criminal made agitation for women's rights an inherent part of her life; imprisonment was inescapable without concerted activism that swelled deep from her core. Gage thrived under attack, and she pursued the right to vote, among other causes, with an unrivaled zeal. Second, Gage was radical, a label that cost her historical immortality. Her radical indictment of the Christian church was especially noteworthy. In her early teens Gage rejected Christianity's view that women were dependent on and subservient to men. Instead, she pursued spiritualism and theosophy later in life. Her radicalism became both an essential part of her character and one of the major reasons why so few people know her story. Anthony in particular recognized that claiming her as central to the woman suffrage narrative was too dangerous, and she actively downplayed Gage's contributions to the cause. As one of the co-editors of the multivolume *History of Woman Suffrage*, Anthony heavily edited or cut entire sections that Gage had contributed.

Carpenter chose her subject wisely. Gage's story, from growing up in a house on the Underground Railroad to her quest to become a doctor, which ultimately failed when no medical school would admit a woman, to her burst into public life at age 26 at the first women's rights meeting in 1852, is remarkable. Gage also raised four children, served prominently in the National Woman Suffrage Association, and created a public profile as a prolific writer and lecturer who believed fervently in women's equality to men in all respects. When her adult children moved to Dakota Territory in the 1880s, Gage became a frequent visitor. Her family's life reflected the lives of many white New Englanders who moved to the Midwest after the Civil War, and Carpenter does not cover up the difficulties her family faced. Economic misfortune, ill health, and racial inequalities are as central to Gage's story as are her efforts to achieve rights for women. It is a compelling narrative for anyone interested in understanding how people responded to the massive transformations that defined the nineteenth-century United States.

Carpenter's aim was to write a compelling biographical narrative for young adult readers, and she accomplishes that task by employing lucid prose, including many helpful images, and dividing her story into 27 easy-to-consume chapters. There are also sections with reader questions, suggested activities, and an author interview. High school students or introductory-level undergraduate students would appreciate

Carpenter's tone and accessibility. Gage helped in her own way by leaving a rich collection of attention-grabbing quotes. Carpenter's appreciation of Gage is apparent, and *Born Criminal* is both an interesting historical account and a tribute to her unflappable spirit.

Dakota in Exile: The Untold Stories of Captives in the Aftermath of the U.S.-Dakota War, by Linda M. Clemmons. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019. xvii, 260 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.50 paperback.

Reviewer Gwen N. Westerman is professor of English and Humanities at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is a coauthor of *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* (2012).

Many works published about Dakota history concentrate on the 1862 war in Minnesota, often with minimal attention to its complicated causes and even less to the devastating effects on the Dakota people afterward. In *Dakota in Exile*, Linda Clemmons introduces multiple different points of view to broaden the analysis of these events through letters, newspaper articles, and reports written by people during that time. What distinguishes her work is the inclusion of letters written by imprisoned and exiled Dakota men and women, including Caskedanġ Robert Hopkins, who grew up reading and writing in his native Dakota language. A Christian convert, he taught other Dakota people to read and write and served as a church elder throughout his life. The historic and cultural legacy of Hopkins and his family is presented in the context of the broader impact of the U.S.-Dakota war on the history of Iowa and the Midwest.

Clemmons provides readers with context for events leading up to the war, including the exponential settlement of the state after the 1851 treaty was signed with the Dakota bands: "In 1850, Minnesota had only 157 farms; by 1860, that number had jumped to 18,081" (20). Although she rightly includes land loss and reservation confinement, corrupt officials, proselytizing missionaries, steamboat tourists, and limited food and supplies among the many factors affecting Dakota people, the author overlooks the years of drought, grasshopper and locust infestations, and financial woes that left not only Dakota families starving by 1862, but also many of the newly established farmers in rural counties as well. (See Mary Lethert Wingerd, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota* [2012]). It is a colossal task to condense a complex history. The growing resentment of Minnesotans toward Dakota communities before the outbreak of war was, however, a major factor in the subsequent backlash against them, including the role of newspapers in fueling post-war hysteria.