

Amorette's Watch: A Civil War Widow and Her Granddaughter

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nized were “consequent to the historic trauma of the Second World War . . . the watershed of our times . . . not as an event encapsulated in the past . . . but as a history which is essentially *not over* . . . whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*” (Felman and Laub, xiv–xv). This idea is pivotal for understanding the context of the Dakota War, one of many watershed events for Natives, as a historic trauma that is still evolving for Dakota peoples. Derounian-Stodola acknowledges Dakota historian Waziyatawin Angela Wilson’s assertion that the war “remains the major point of demarcation in Dakota history,” and that a combination of factors, including being “severed from the land . . . confined to reservations in new lands . . . suffering disconnection,” forever changed the Dakota’s relationship with the rest of the world (5). The indigenous people living in Minnesota in 1862 were severed from the world as they knew it. Survival and memory make up the bones of captivity narratives that, according to Derounian-Stodola, are “any story with captors . . . and captives” (3).

Thus, survival and bearing witness are credible and validated processes for Euro-Americans but for indigenous Americans there is still a lack of acknowledgment, a discounting of testimony and witness and a disempowerment of voice. There are many pivotal points in history for the large number of American Indians in this country, and the historic trauma for these indigenous groups is not over; the consequences that are still evolving are really the core of understanding indigenous narratives. Derounian-Stodola allows the dialogue and narratives to “speak.” By doing so she has shown the highest respect. Her efforts at leveling the historical playing field by not only giving voice to those Natives who were previously voiceless in history but also by attempting to illustrate how wartime memories are wounds that are interpreted differently by each group because of personal, cultural, and historical context, should not go unnoticed.

Amorette’s Watch: A Civil War Widow and Her Granddaughter, by Virginia Foote. Berkeley, CA: Regent Press, 2009. Illustrations. \$20.00 paper.

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Amorette’s Watch begins with the story of how Virginia Foote lost a watch that once belonged to her grandmother, Amorette; it was her only tangible inheritance of the ancestor she never knew. The loss spurs an attempt to follow her grandmother along a somewhat faint

paper trail of legal documents, county histories, and family records. The book is part history, part personal memoir, and part research narrative; it hints at creative ways to engage evidence, but left me wishing that the author had made more use of the possibilities of exploring the self through history.

Amorette Foote, born in 1839, led a life that is remarkable for its intersections with nineteenth-century migrations, Reconstruction efforts, and women's mission movements. She traveled from New York to Iowa in 1857 and married in 1859. Her husband, Seth, moved farther west to seek gold, fought in the Civil War, and died at home after a battle injury. In 1882 Amorette traveled with her son, Dellizon (the author's father, born in 1862) to Dakota Territory to homestead; beginning in 1888, she worked as a matron at the Chicago Training School for female missionaries. In 1892 she left for Alabama to oversee a dormitory at Talladega College, a school for African Americans. By 1900 she was in Los Angeles superintending a Women's Home Missionary Society's Deaconess Home. She died in 1909 in Omaha, where she lived with Dell.

There are some intriguing episodes in this journey. Amorette's decade-long attempt to claim a widow's pension reveals the effect of war deaths on women's economic lives. Her struggle with her father-in-law, who controlled Seth's estate and charged Amorette for expenses even as she cared for her dying husband, shows how deeply assumptions about women's marital service permeated family life. Equally evocative is an incident in which Amorette plays a central role in expelling a Talladega student over a civil rights protest. At a college dedicated to the "uplift" of African Americans in the racially supercharged Reconstruction South, as Foote recognizes, there was a fine line between maintaining authority and "only partially suppressed racial prejudice" among those pledged to "conquer" such feelings (232).

Part of Foote's aim is to "reach across a whole generation" to "take [her grandmother's] hand" (21). Yet Amorette's life is elusive. She left no diary. Seth's Civil War letters were lost. The only writings by Amorette that Foote can identify are annual reports she made at the Los Angeles Deaconess Home beginning in 1901. Thus, Foote tells Amorette's story partly through others'. One of the most engaging sections, in fact, deals with Seth's movements at the battles of Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge, where he was injured. Foote also uses incidents from her own life — her wartime marriage, the pressures she felt as a young mother to "schedule" her baby, her multiple divorces, her involvement in a college civil rights protest — to draw parallels between lives separated by nearly a century. But just as Amorette, who was in-

volved in so many historically significant movements, left little for her granddaughter to go on, Foote opens the door on her own life too briefly and seems hesitant to reflect on the larger significance of her grandmother's life and her own.

Foote sounds some key notes in women's history through these brief interludes — changing social attitudes towards motherhood, marriage, and civil rights protest — but I yearned for her to sustain these chords longer through reflection and contextualization to make them resonate more within women's history. Other writers have examined their lives through the lens of history (Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir*) or have used speculation engagingly to fill in the blanks in the historical record (Melton McLaurin's *Celia, A Slave*); these might have been effective strategies. The considerable scholarship on women's nineteenth-century lives, mission work, and economic struggles — including struggles for property rights — does not appear in the notes. Thus Foote sometimes only guesses at answers to easily researched questions: Why would a single woman travel west in 1859? What circumstances may have led to Seth's financial failures in 1850s Iowa, and why would Amorette marry him anyway?

The openings that Foote leaves provide opportunities for researchers. Amorette's work in Chicago might be framed by the pre-history of women's mission work and the post-history of women's settlement houses in that city. Her economic struggles could lead students to ask questions about Iowa women's property and dower rights. It also could provide a model for students to understand how broad social movements and events may have affected their ancestors.

Foote's book might hold the most interest for lay researchers uncovering family histories or investigating individuals who left few marks on the historical record. Her overt descriptions of her research process can feel awkward, but they expose the methods and frustrations of research into the lives of ordinary people. Some passages convey, in a way that more conventional histories do not, the thrill of archival discovery. Foote writes of finding her grandfather's original signature: "I saw the letters his hand had formed. . . . The sight assured me, in a new and tangible way, of his existence" (44).

Amorette's existence is never quite so tangible, and perhaps this is one of the lessons of doing history on subordinate groups — fewer left such indelible signatures. While she follows some trails admirably, Foote could have made more use of the lamps lit by other writers of history and memoir that might have helped to bring more of Amorette's journey out of the shadows.