

Book Reviews

Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War, by Elizabeth D. Leonard. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994. xxv, 308 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$23.00 cloth.

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In *Yankee Women* Elizabeth Leonard reconstructs the lives of three unusual northern women who participated in the Civil War. At a time when most Americans, male and female, believed women to be delicate and best suited to home life, Sophronia Bucklin and Mary Walker of New York and Annie Wittenmyer of Iowa were determined to use their skills in war-related work. Not surprisingly, they encountered conflicts and frustration, but they achieved some successes as well and helped to widen professional paths for women.

Elizabeth Leonard tells the women's stories in detailed and fascinating terms. Sophronia Bucklin and Mary Walker, both unmarried women from upstate New York, left home with the goal of doing medical work for the Union army, Bucklin as a nurse and Walker as a doctor. Bucklin joined the corps of army nurses hastily organized in 1861 under the leadership of Dorothea Dix. Bucklin was proud, all in all, of the hospital work she did during the next three years, but she was also constrained by the limited vision of women's abilities and rights built into the nursing system. The nurses' moral purity was more important to Dix than their medical skill, and she made an older, matronly appearance the key requirement for hospital duty. There was also debate about whether the presumed selflessness of nurses would be compromised if they accepted wages for their work. There was no debate, however, about the subordination of women to men. After the war, Bucklin recognized that her experiences represented an unprecedented adventure for a woman. Still, she found herself in a setting where women were encouraged to be sexless, unacquisitive, and mild.

Mary Walker entered the war with grander ambitions than Bucklin, and her temperament was certainly not mild. Walker arrived in Washington in the fall of 1861 with the goal of acquiring a commission as an army surgeon. Walker's "commitment to achieving her goal," Leonard concludes, led to the uncompromising image she projected and "overwhelmed her strategic sense, her political savvy" (134). Although a board of medical examiners judged this mannishly dressed, unconventionally trained female doctor to be incompetent, Walker did

work as an army surgeon through most of the war, but her history consisted of frequent transfers and conflicts with male authorities. Victorian assumptions about gender differences and the way their clarity was challenged by the war seem to have brought out unpleasant personality traits on each side, among the men who behaved inflexibly and in the woman who fought the system.

Annie Wittenmyer was in many ways unlike Bucklin and Walker. She had been married and widowed, she was wealthy, she came from the Midwest, and she was relatively successful in achieving her goals. Living in Keokuk in 1861, Wittenmyer drew on her prewar experience in Christian benevolence when she established the Keokuk Ladies' Soldiers' Aid Society to gather hospital supplies for Iowa's troops. As in Walker's case, Wittenmyer's assertiveness and independence led to conflict with male leaders. Beginning with the establishment of a state branch of the Sanitary Commission by Iowa's governor in October 1861, the men and women involved in war-related benevolence competed for supplies and influence. Wittenmyer was even publicly accused of profiteering. Unlike Walker, however, Wittenmyer was able to recognize when she was beaten and to see how she could sidestep a tight situation by finding a more profitable field. In late 1863 she organized the Orphan Asylum Association to place war orphans in group homes, and in 1864 she initiated "special diet kitchens" throughout the Union army, which brought Wittenmyer national acclaim.

The stories of Sophronia Bucklin, Mary Walker, and Annie Wittenmyer lead Elizabeth Leonard to at least two important conclusions. First, Yankee women were active and independent-minded participants in the Civil War. Frank Moore's *Women of the War* (1866) and Linus Brockett and Mary Vaughan's *Woman's Work in the Civil War* (1867) were influential books of the period that portrayed northern women as self-sacrificing, long-suffering, and willingly subordinate to men. Leonard aims to expose this image as a myth, and her biographies will certainly make readers wonder how many other Yankee women were as ambitious, self-assured, and at least occasionally contentious as these three. Second, Leonard believes that the Civil War was a watershed in the history of gender: "Wars produce abrupt, conscious, and concentrated adjustments in the behaviors considered appropriate for men and women and allow for some crossing of gender lines otherwise considered inviolable" (xxi). Although she becomes more cautious at the end of the book, adding the qualifying thought that the war also revealed "the [gender] system's fundamental resilience and stubborn durability," Leonard does argue that the brave initiatives of Civil War-era women made Americans rethink women's capabilities and slowly open new professional fields such as nursing to them (199).

Probably most historians of gender in the Civil War era—among them George Rable, Nina Silber, and Kathleen Diffley—see less change than Leonard in the lives and images of women. Rather than enter this subtle debate about how transforming the war was, it may be more helpful to consider the likely reason that Leonard reached her conclusion: her focus on exceptional women. *Yankee Women* seems based on the assumption that we can learn most about a cultural system by examining extreme cases that test rules and limits. As unattached, mobile, and ambitious women, Leonard's subjects were unusual in their time, and their lives might be expected to draw attention to points of stress and revision in women's roles, not to aspects of women's experience that remained the same.

More generally, this biographical approach has weaknesses as well as strengths. Leonard has produced intimate portraits of three highly motivated and disciplined women, but the spotlight on their stories risks distortion. Too often Bucklin, Walker, and Wittenmyer appear as pure-minded heroes in a seamlessly unjust society. Typically, when Leonard documents the long debate in Iowa about whether men or women were more competent to deliver supplies to the soldiers, she assumes that the women's claim to superiority was justified (58). Yet this was an era when women had less experience than men with bureaucracy, and it is important for historians to think critically about nineteenth-century women and their skills. Perhaps Annie Wittenmyer was exceptionally well qualified to organize war relief, but perhaps she was not.

These "Yankee women" also seem detached from their historical context because they are pictured as exemplary figures. It is consequently difficult to understand their motives and reactions as human beings. If Victorian beliefs about women emphasized their limitations, how did these women become so free-thinking and rebellious? If they witnessed the horrors of war, why is there no evidence that they were moved and saddened by their experience? If they came from different parts of the country, why were their agendas for women so similar? Leonard succeeds in presenting her women as pioneering feminists, but at the expense of exploring their experiences as women, citizens, and residents of specific regions. Identity is complicated, and a more contextual approach to the women's stories might have revealed tensions within themselves as well as in their struggles with men.

Yankee Women is a readable, engaging, and intelligent introduction to northern women's involvement in the Civil War. Elizabeth Leonard has shown convincingly that the women of the era were not passive but contributed to the outcome of the war and worked to shape events to enhance opportunities for American women.

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