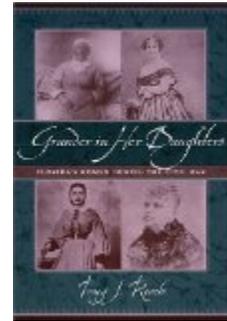


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tracy J. Revels. *Grander in Her Daughters: Florida's Women during the Civil War*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. xvi + 205 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-559-3.

Reviewed by Laura Prieto (Departments of History and Women's Studies, Simmons College)
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The Outskirts of the Confederacy

Long recognized as the best selling nonfiction topic in the U.S. book industry, the history of the Civil War has not yet been told exhaustively. In her new book, Tracy J. Revels, associate professor of history at Wofford College, traces the social history of a doubly overlooked group: Florida women. While the subject of women's participation in the Civil War has attracted increasing attention since the 1980s, Florida remains tangential to both women's historians and social historians of the war. The snub is in some ways understandable. Florida was predominantly rural, the least populated of Southern states in 1860, and thus could contribute little militarily to the Confederacy. Its literally marginal location also made Florida the Confederate state "least physically affected by the war" (p. 134). Yet, as many scholars have shown by now, war comprises more than battle strategies and combatants. It is a profoundly gendered activity to which women and the "homefront" matter, in both symbolic and practical ways.[1]

Revel bases her examination on impressive archival research, usually having to search through voluminous family papers (or men's personal papers) to find evidence of and by women. She makes extensive use of correspondence, especially between married couples such as Octavia and Winston Stephens; diaries, as that of New Hampshire-born physician Esther Hill Hawks; and memoirs, like Ellen Call Long's fictionalized account, *Florida Breezes* (1882). This is satisfying as bread-and-butter social history, interweaving the personal experiences of many different individuals. Revels provides vivid anecdotes and examples for what is, in most respects, a fa-

miliar story of women's wartime sufferings and contributions. Other stories emerge also, however, like that of the unnamed slave women, enigmatically smiling as they stirred black vats to dye their mistresses' mourning clothes. Throughout the book, Revels emphasizes the diversity of women's experiences; indeed, a distrust of generalizations is a persistent theme.

Florida was a place of curious contrasts; while the state's rural nature rendered the outbreak of war a "non-event" for "vast tracts of the state," elsewhere the high enthusiasm for secession led Florida to recruit the highest percentage of eligible men into military service for the Confederacy (p. 17). But this strong support for the Confederate cause began to wane by 1862 as military casualties and economic privations imposed their burdens on the shocked women at home. Unsurprisingly, the war seriously disrupted family life, though women and men struggled to preserve ties of love and fidelity through their letters to one another. Parents strove to provide as normal a childhood as they could for their offspring but they could not avoid increasing pressures for children to shoulder greater responsibilities as workers and even as underage soldiers. As in other wars, men's absence from home, whether to fight or to hide from military conscription, required women to take over men's roles on the home front, managing plantations, farms, and businesses as best they could. Slave women, too, carried new burdens, yet they found increasing opportunities to resist white female authority in the ensuing chaos (p. 67). Women were left to their own devices to "make do" for themselves and their families through home pro-

duction, improvising with whatever local materials were at hand as sugar, spices, clothing, and medicine became unobtainable. A later chapter reveals that white women learned many of these techniques (such as making ink from pomegranate rinds, and tea from corn shucks) from their slaves. Poor white “cracker” women likewise had knowledge and resources on which to draw, accustomed as they were to wearing homespun clothes and working in the fields. Yet even in the face of extreme hardship, Florida women continued fund-raising, sewing, and nursing in support of their troops until the very end. So unconscious were they of the fortunes of war that shock and incredulity greeted the news of General Lee’s surrender at Appomattox.

The complex portrait that Revels amasses is sensitive to the vectors of race, class, and marital status as well as sex. Commendably, she includes Unionist as well as Confederate women in her study. She does a particularly fine job tracing the history of black women, slave and free, during the war—a challenging task indeed. She is less successful, however, at illuminating the lives of the majority of white women in Florida: the uneducated “plain folk” whose families farmed a scant few acres around their cabins. “Cracker” women are never the observers, always the observed. As such, they were subject to ridicule (as the vulgar-mannered, filthy, leather-faced farmwife) or pity (as hard-scrabble, impoverished drudges); either way, they were seen as the antithesis to the Southern lady. They were perhaps even more exotic than African Americans in the view of the literate planters and travelers who wrote about them. Revels’s very use of the term “cracker” to refer to these women is problematic. On the one hand, it is the term her primary sources use, and some scholars have tried to reclaim the appellation as a positive one.[2] In common parlance, however, “cracker” remains a pejorative, a fact Revels does not convey. Nor does she explain why she chooses to use “cracker” over, for example, “plain folk.”[3] If “cracker” women are more broadly represented in this book than it first appears, Revels does not mark them as such. Only a handful of references explicitly differentiate between “crackers” and other white women.

Another question raised by this book is a comparative one. Drew Faust, George Rable, and LeeAnn Whites have already written excellent histories of Confederate women.[4] If Florida is basically like the rest of the Confederacy, as Revels maintains, what then is to be gained by a focused study of Florida women (pp. 2-3)? What significance does this study hold for those who do not have a special interest in Florida history? Revels questions

other historians’ conclusions that, in postwar decades, Confederate women remained mesmerized by the past, or that their wartime experiences pointed them toward suffragism by the 1890s. Ultimately, she seems to find Florida women did not share the degree of public empowerment, nor the transformation of gender relations, that other Southern and Northern women experienced; their focus remained fixed upon family. But whether this is a difference of interpretation or a difference of place remains to be seen. Revels herself shies away from fully integrating her research into existing scholarship.

The most recent scholarly work on women and the American Civil War has taken a cultural approach, analyzing important shifts in gender ideology and representation both during the war and in the construction of its memory.[5] Those looking for a similar engagement in Revels’s book will be disappointed. *Grander in Her Daughters* is, rather, a carefully researched view from the ground. Preferring “to let Florida’s women speak for themselves” as much as possible, Revels creates a composite portrait that is sensitive to the great diversity of experience characterizing the Civil War in Florida (p. xiii). Her findings contribute to a fuller, truer account of how women across the Confederacy weathered this crucial turning point.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

[2]. Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988).

[3]. Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949); David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams, and David Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man’s War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

[4]. Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

[5]. Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: Uni-

versity of North Carolina Press, 2001); LeeAnn Whites, *1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).
The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia,

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