

Sylvia D. Hoffert. *Jane Grey Swisshelm: An Unconventional Life 1815-1884.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 255 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2881-6.



Reviewed by Stan Harrold

Published on H-SHEAR (January, 2006)

Jane Gray Swisshelm (1815-1884) was a remarkable figure in mid-nineteenth-century reform journalism and politics. A dedicated and courageous advocate of black freedom and women's rights, she had to be reckoned with in western Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and in some cases nationally. This petite white woman, characterized by more than one observer as bird-like, was a fiercely independent contrarian whose acerbic wit and cutting sarcasm attracted attention but also limited her effectiveness. Self-centered, aggressive, and contentious, she rejected formal membership in reform organizations.

Swisshelm gained prominence as editor of the *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, which she published from 1847 to 1857. In its pages she advocated temperance, abolition, Free Soil politics, and women's rights. In 1850 she gained notoriety when, as a Washington, D.C. correspondent for the *New York Tribune* she charged that Daniel Webster had sired children with a black mistress. In 1857 she removed to frontier Minnesota where she published the *St. Cloud Visiter* and faced violent opposition from local Democrats. During the Civil

War she moved back to Washington, D.C., where she worked as a government clerk, volunteered as a nurse, and published a Radical Republican newspaper. She ceased publishing newspapers in 1866, but remained active as a writer and lecturer in behalf of reform.

Swisshelm was hardly unique during an era when numerous women emerged as antislavery and feminist activists. Maria W. Stewart and Angelina and Sarah Grimke broke the gender barrier as public speakers during the 1830s. Abolitionist journalists Lydia Maria Child and Maria Westman Chapman employed an imperious, confrontational writing style years before Swisshelm. Six years after the *Vister* appeared, Mary Ann Shadd began editing the *Provincial Freeman*, a black abolitionist paper published in Toronto. Other women participated in antislavery politics. Yet, as Sylvia D. Hoffert puts it, Swisshelm led "an unconventional life." At a time when "respectable" middle- and upper-class women sought fulfillment in marriage, Swisshelm challenged the contemporary understanding of that institution in a years-long dispute with her husband and mother-in-law over

money and property. It ended in divorce in 1860. Meanwhile Swisshelm, in Hoffert's words, "negotiated a place for herself in the male world of commerce, journalism, and politics" (p. 8).

Shortly before Swisshelm's death, the *Pittsburgh Chronicle Telegraph* described her as "Pittsburgh's most celebrated woman." [1] Her obituary appeared in the country's leading newspapers. Her autobiography, *Half a Century*, based almost entirely on memory, provides a readable account of her life to 1866. [2] Yet Swisshelm attracted little more than passing interest from historians until 1978 when Peter Walker included a (116 pages) long and psychologically probing sketch of her life in his book on abolitionist motivation. Since then Michael D. Pierson and Frederick J. Blue have published brief interpretations of Swisshelm's life centered on her role as an antislavery journalist and political activist. Pierson, who is especially interested in how Free Soil and Republican women differed ideologically from their male counterparts, also features her in his 2003 book on gender and antislavery politics. [3] Hoffert, in articles published between 1997 and 2001, extended a gendered analysis of Swisshelm's life beyond politics. [4] This approach dominates *An Unconventional Life*. Hoffert frequently uses her subject as a lens through which to reveal larger gender issues.

An Unconventional Life is also an unconventional biography in that Hoffert approaches her subject topically rather than chronologically. After a "prologue" that briefly outlines major events in Swisshelm's life, Hoffert presents chapters devoted to Swisshelm's religious views, her marriage, her struggle with her husband and in-laws over property, her experience in a masculine work environment, her politics and journalism, her reformism, and her social class as defined by her relationship with her adult daughter. This organization allows Hoffert to analyze carefully the various facets of Swisshelm's life, particularly in regard to how her experiences reveal nineteenth-

century American gender conventions and her responses to them. Because some of the chapter topics match up roughly with chronological periods at the beginning and end of her life, a sense of growth and change over time is not lacking. The first chapter emphasizing religion also considers Swisshelm's childhood, the second and third chapters dealing with her marriage overlap with her life as a young adult, and the last chapter on her social class covers her final years. But there are drawbacks to this organizational scheme. There is a good deal of repetition as Hoffert discusses the same events (Swisshelm's stressful marriage, her initiation of the *Visiter*, her removal to Minnesota) in different contexts. In a few instances historical characters are mentioned before they are introduced to readers. More significantly, the topical approach leads Hoffert to omit discussions of aspects of Swisshelm's life that do not relate to topical themes. There is, for example, little or no analysis of Swisshelm's relationship to other abolitionists, her alleged slander of Daniel Webster, her response to John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, and her involvement in Liberal Republican politics in 1872.

Hoffert demonstrates that Swisshelm's devotion to a Scottish Covenanter Presbyterian brand of Calvinism simultaneously "empowered and crippled her" (pp. 31-32). Swisshelm's personal covenant with God, formed during her teenage years, gave her the courage to challenge "gender boundaries," but also committed her to conventional views concerning differences between men and women (pp. 23-24). In this context, Hoffert provides an excellent explanation of how orthodox Calvinism might encourage a level of social activism equal to that produced by evangelical Christian faiths. Hoffert suggests as well that at least part of Swisshelm's difficult personality derived from her religious and ethnic background.

Religion plays a role in Hoffert's discussion of Swisshelm's troubled marriage, as her husband and mother-in-law attempted to convert her to

Methodism. But Hoffert is more concerned with using the marriage to explain the roots of Swissshelm's feminism. The marriage's failure, Hoffert argues, "prompted her to begin thinking in a systematic way about the general condition of married women" (p. 47). Hoffert also shows how the failure of Swissshelm's husband to fulfill his masculine role of provider (as well as his determination to gain control of her inheritance) encouraged her to become a professional journalist, to undertake a partially successful effort to revise Pennsylvania's married women's property law, and become an advocate of vocational training for women.

Hoffert's chapter "Women's Work in a Man's World" is the best in the book. Noting that the market revolution encouraged excluding women from or marginalizing them in the workplace, she clarifies the difficulties Swissshelm and other working women faced. As the only woman in a newspaper office, Swissshelm learned to anticipate and avoid charges of sexual impropriety, modify the behavior of male employees, discourage their assumption that she was frail and dependent, and promote respect for other female workers and women who might visit the office. Swissshelm understood that she enjoyed advantages in the workplace that most women did not. She became an advocate for the rights of all working women, especially in regard to pay and protection from insult and abuse.

Hoffert's chapter on Swissshelm's politics also deals with her journalism. It overlaps in subject matter with the chapter on work that precedes it and the chapter of her involvement in reform that follows it. In 1844 Swissshelm identified with abolitionist Liberty Party. In 1848 she joined the great majority of its supporters in switching to the broader-based Free Soil Party. During the late 1850s (by which time she had moved to Minnesota) she became a rather reluctant advocate of the Republican Party, with her reluctance stemming mainly from local political rivalries. Largely

through her role as a newspaper editor, she influenced the selection of local and state candidates for office. Hoffert, however, does not adequately analyze Swissshelm's brand of political abolitionism and its relationship to the wider antislavery movement. There is no indication, for example, of how she regarded the radical political abolitionists or the Garrisonians. Also Hoffert makes little use of Pierson's finding that Swissshelm and other women who supported the Free Soil and Republican parties were in their moralism and constitutional interpretations closer to abolitionists than were Republican men.

Despite her aggressive writing and speaking style, Swissshelm was a moderate abolitionist and moderate women's rights advocate as well. Unlike more radical white abolitionists, she does not appear to have cooperated (prior to the Civil War) with black abolitionists or to have advocated anti-slavery violence (although she did express admiration for John Brown following his Harpers Ferry raid). She supported the Republican Party's emphasis on preventing the expansion of slavery rather than political action against slavery where it existed. Similarly she was a gradualist regarding women's rights in contrast to such prominent feminists as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Parker Pillsbury, Frances Gage, and Lucy Stone, with whom she often quarreled. Geography as well as personality determined Swissshelm's standing as a journalist, politician, and reformer. Western Pennsylvania and frontier Minnesota were regions where moderate forms of political abolitionism prevailed, and both regions were far from the centers of organized feminism. Swissshelm, nevertheless, did not lack courage. In Minnesota she dealt steadfastly with political opponents who broke into her office, destroyed her press, and threatened her life. In Washington she nursed dreadfully wounded Civil War soldiers and volunteered on behalf of the large number of former slaves who sought refuge in the city.

Hoffert's final chapter demonstrates that Swisshelm also had the courage to analyze her personality flaws. Although Swisshelm herself could not adjust to the rituals of polite society, she had done all she could to enhance her daughter's social standing. By 1879 the two of them had settled in Chicago, where her daughter married an insurance company executive. Despite failing health, when Swisshelm became convinced that she could not change her "'unfeminine' and 'ungenteel' behavior," which hurt the couple's social ambitions, she left Chicago to return to Pennsylvania where she died (p. 187).

Hoffert balances her assessments of Swisshelm's accomplishments with recognition that she was "uncooperative, uncollaborative, and often unsisterly" (p. 196). Difficult as she was, it seems likely that Swisshelm would have approved of this biography.

Notes

[1]. Peter J. Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Abolition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p. 205.

[2]. Jane Swisshelm, *Half a Century* (1880; reprint, New York: Sourcebook, 1970).

[3]. Michael D. Pierson, "Between Antislavery and Abolition: The Politics and Rhetoric of Jane Grey Swisshelm," *Pennsylvania History* 60 (July 1993): pp. 305-21; "Gender and Party Ideologies: The Constitutional thought of Women and Men in American Anti-Slavery Politics," *Slavery and Abolition* 19 (December 1998): pp. 46-67; *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Frederick J. Blue, *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), pp. 138-160.

[4]. Sylvia D. Hoffert, "Gender and Vigilantism on the Minnesota Frontier: Jane Grey Swisshelm and the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862," *Western His-*

torical Quarterly 29 (1998): pp. 343-62; "Jane Grey Swisshelm and the Negotiation of Gender Roles on the Minnesota Frontier," *Frontiers* 18 (1997): pp. 17-39; "Theoretical Issues: Jane Grey Swisshelm, Elizabeth Keckley, and the Significance of Race Consciousness in American Women's Lives," *Journal of Women's History* 13 (2001): pp. 8-32.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Stan Harrold. Review of Hoffert, Sylvia D. *Jane Grey Swisshelm: An Unconventional Life 1815-1884*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11309>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.