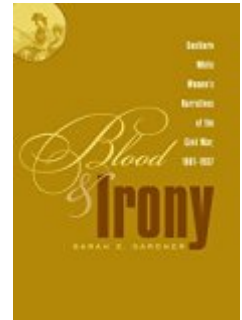


**Sarah E. Gardner.** *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. x + 352 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2818-2.



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Before Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) shaped the national memory of the Civil War in the 1930s, thousands of southern white women regarded themselves as the preservers of the truth about the Confederacy, the war, and ultimate defeat. Through their writings, as Sarah Gardner argues, these women sought to structure the way their region and, indeed, the nation would remember the valiant efforts of white southerners to protect their rights and way of life. From the beginning of the war until the early decades of the twentieth century, they fiercely challenged the dominant northern interpretations of the origins and meanings of the war and Confederate defeat. Since "southern white women did not entrust even their own menfolk with the telling of war" (p. 4), they used their own writings to help define post-war southern identity and construct the myth of the Lost Cause. Gardner has examined a vast number and wide range of these women's writings--fiction, diaries, biographies, letters, educational texts, histories, and, especially, the papers of the United Daughters of the Confederacy--to chronicle the ways in which southern white women's narratives of the Civil

War changed and influenced their society from 1861 through 1937. One of the merits of this book is that it includes major writers, such as Augusta Evans and Ellen Glasgow, minor writers, such as Mary Johnston and Helen Dortch Longstreet, as well as women who kept diaries or wrote memoirs intended only for family members.

Soon after the first shot was fired, some female writers of the Confederacy "transgressed the boundaries of domestic fiction" and entered the traditionally male arena of political and military writing by attacking northern policies and crafting fictional narratives not only with heroines and love interests, but also with camp and battle scenes in order to rally support for the Cause (p. 33). When compared with those who would come later, these Confederate writers were the lucky ones. "Unburdened by defeat," they "could imagine a future for the independent southern nation" (p. 36). When the shooting stopped, later writers, engulfed by loss, would have to struggle with the challenge of incorporating defeat into their southern identity. Gardner argues that the first postwar generation of women who put pen to paper met

the challenge by writing more about "the romance of sectionalism" than about the romance of reunion (p. 54). Thus began the myth of the Lost Cause. The "virtues of slavery, the evils of abolitionism, the grandeur of southern plantations, the heroism of southern leaders, the wickedness of the northern army, and the pain of defeat" all started to take shape in these women's narratives--both fictional and non-fictional (pp. 55-56). Stories of southern belles refusing northern officers or ultimately dying if they did marry them became a regular theme, more common than the theme of a happy (re)union.

Women writing after Reconstruction struggled with conflicting images of the South and either turned back toward a romanticized past or forward toward a promising future--anything but focusing on their painful present. As the meanings of the Civil War were increasingly being debated in the public arena, southern white female writers penned epic tales that, Gardner concludes, cast "the Confederates as the protagonists, transformed humiliating defeat into justified warfare, and fought to control the establishment of 'historical truth'" (p. 76). No group of women did this better than the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC)--a main focus of this book. The UDC firmly believed that its members had a "divinely commanded imperative" to "tell the 'true' story of the Civil War" (p. 117). Of course, this was a truth that romanticized and celebrated the past and rested on the idea that the Confederacy had fought to protect its liberties from a North that sought to take them away. The UDC drafted guidelines concerning content and presentation to instruct members how to write about the war. It also created a textbook committee to help control what southern children read about the war. In the end, the UDC "forcibly demonstrated that southern women possessed a great deal of cultural power by encouraging its members to wield their pens" (p. 128).

After the turn of the twentieth century, the southern story of the war gradually became the national story, culminating with Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. The literary market readily published the works of southern white women, whose "consciousnesses," Gardner argues, were "still consumed" with the Civil War (p. 180). The UDC continued to hold tremendous influence over the historical memory of the war and women continued to write stories infused with Lost Cause mythology. The "'women's side of the war,'" Gardner contends, remained important to the "public discourse on the war" (p. 181). The popularity of Mary Chesnut's *Diary from Dixie*, published in 1905, is an outstanding testament to this point.

One of Gardner's most important contributions is her analysis of the impact of World War I on southern women's narratives. That war created not only a renewed focus on the Civil War, but also a new way to view the war. Many southern female writers came to see the Civil War as more of a national tragedy and less a glorification of the Confederacy. Margaret Mitchell's "ability to transform a southern story of the Civil War into a national story" allowed her to succeed "where generations of southern white women authors had failed" (p. 234). While her story of Scarlett O'Hara's struggles drew on the familiar elements of the Lost Cause from earlier women's writings, she shaped it into a national story by adding elements that could appeal to those outside of the South as well. Scarlett came not from an old cavalier family, but a recently immigrated one. And, as Gardner stresses, Mitchell "strip[ped] the Old South of its 'peculiar institution,' substituting racism for slavery," which, in that era, meant a "story that the nation could embrace" (p. 236). *Gone with the Wind* was such a success because it "offered a nostalgic depiction of the Old South but did not advocate its return" (p. 239). In fact, Scarlett's fulfillment came in an industrialized New South, not an agricultural Old South.

Gardner's research is impressive. Her analysis of the patterns in southern white women's writings and what they reveal about their views of the war and the meanings of southern identity is persuasive. But in her quest to show so many of the women (who desired to contribute their voices) and to examine all of the gradual changes in content, style, and presentation in the writings, the book is dragged down by an excess of examples and becomes repetitive in a number of places. There are just too many lengthy plot summaries of too many almost-identical narratives. Furthermore, the changes from period to period are often so subtle, sometimes almost negligible, that parts of the book could easily have been condensed. Briefer summaries and tighter comparisons and contrasts among the writers would have made the book stronger as well as more readable.

Ultimately, this book has more literary than historical appeal. For those interested in the lives and roles of white women in the postbellum South and their historical significance, this work is not as useful as other scholarly studies in the field. I would not assign it for either southern or women's history courses. More valuable, though not covering as long a period of time, is Jane Turner Censer's *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (2003). But those who are interested in the literature produced by Reconstruction-era and New South white women or in the construction of the myth of the Lost Cause should certainly read *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937*.

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