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Laura Leedy Gansler. *The Mysterious Private Thompson: The Double Life of Sarah Emma Edmonds, Civil War Soldier.* New York: Free Press, 2005. xii + 255 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7432-4280-6.

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A Woman Soldier's Civil War Story

In the last decade or so, the experiences of women who served in male disguise in the armies of the Union and the Confederacy have captured the renewed attention of professional historians and popular audiences. While Americans knew and read of such stories during the Civil War, modern audiences are often surprised to learn that hundreds of women served as soldiers in Civil War armies. Through the recent research of several historians, the stories of these military women have resurfaced and they are gradually gaining the recognition they deserve.

Laura Leedy Gansler's book, *The Mysterious Private Thompson: The Double Life of Sarah Emma Edmonds, Civil War Soldier*, is the latest publication to focus on the experiences of women who served in the military under male aliases during the Civil War.[1] With this work, Gansler, who is a lawyer and writer and not a professional historian, seeks to bring the story of one Civil War woman soldier to popular audiences.[2] In clear and accessible prose, Gansler recounts the life story of Sarah Emma Edmonds, the most well known of all female Civil War soldiers. Edmonds, a Canadian woman who lived as a man for five years both before and during the American Civil War, served in the Union Army for two years and was the only known woman granted a federal veteran's pension. Edmonds published a best-selling account of her military experiences during the Civil War and her story was widely publicized in the 1880s when she came forward in an effort to claim the veteran's pension. After that, her story became at best a footnote in Civil War historiography until Sylvia Dannett published a thorough biography of Edmonds in 1960.[3] More recently, Edmonds has figured prominently in the meticulously researched works of historian Elizabeth Leonard, archivist DeAnne Blanton, and author Lauren Cook. Additionally, Edmonds's *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy* (1865) has been reissued with a new introduction and annotations by Leonard.

The Mysterious Private Thompson is different from these most recent publications in that it relates Edmonds's experiences before, during, and after the Civil War in a biographical, narrative format. Gansler begins her account of Edmonds's life by proposing to find out "why a young girl in 1858 would choose to abandon everything she knew ... for the chance to live as a man, a transformation that had much to say about both what kind of person she was, and what kind of society she lived in" (p. xi). Gansler then outlines Edmonds's early life growing up in Nova Scotia, her decision at age eighteen to leave home and assume a male identity, her subsequent stint as a traveling book salesman, her two-year service in the Union Army, and her return to womanhood after the war. Gansler's fast-paced, page-turning narrative style draws readers into Edmonds's extraordinary experiences and brings her to life in a way that makes Edmonds seem real and relatable.

While Gansler engagingly unfolds the narrative of Edmonds's adventures, ably providing the who, what, when, and where of Edmonds's life, she falls short of offering readers compelling insights into why Edmonds did what she did and what Edmonds's story says about "the kind of society she lived in." In this telling, the complexities and consequences of continually confronting and rejecting the gendered limitations of mid-nineteenth-century America are not fully explored. Edmonds's decision to live as a man seems rather easy and straightforward–almost commonplace, and not particularly difficult to pull off. In truth, Edmonds was an anomaly and further exploration of her decision to live as a man, her perceptions and experiences while living as a man, and the repercussions for her womanhood would have benefited the reader. As the book purports to examine "Emma's journey from Emma Edmonds to Frank Thompson, and back, and her struggle ever afterward to reconcile the girl and the soldier into a cohesive sense of self" (p. xii), providing context about mid-nineteenth-

century conceptions of gender and prescribed roles for women and men is critical for helping readers to understand Edmonds's experiences and motivations. Though Gansler consulted and cites secondary sources for background information on Civil War-era political, military, religious, medical, and even etiquette history, similar attention was not paid to the rich and abundant scholarship on women's history, antebellum gender ideology, and the fluidity of gender roles during the Civil War.[4]

For both historical context and information about Edmonds, Gansler relied on information gleaned from secondary source material. The bibliography for *The Mysterious Private Thompson* lists only three archival sources, and Dannett's comprehensive biography of Edmonds and the recently published works of Leonard, Blanton, and Cook are copiously cited in Gansler's endnotes. Many primary source citations are also attributed to Dannett, without whose "primary research," Gansler notes, "this book would not have been possible" (p. 243). Yet, Gansler is at her best in the sections of the book where she does offer original interpretations of archival sources, particularly the personal papers of Jerome Robbins, a fellow solider to whom Edmonds revealed her true identity during the war. It would also have been helpful for Gansler to differentiate in her narrative between sources published by or about Edmonds in the 1860s, the 1880s, the 1910s, the 1930s, or the 1950s. Many of the quotations used to document Edmonds's perceptions of herself as a soldier during the 1860s were drawn from sources produced long after the Civil War. Edmonds's words, the accounts of others who served with her in the army, and the subsequent interpretations of her story are all accepted as equally valid in retelling Edmonds's Civil War story, regardless of publication date or the possibility that Edmonds and others may have recounted and remembered their stories in particular ways. Several editorial errors are also evident in the book: the omission of Edmonds's memoir from the bibliography, a few typos and misspellings, and an instance in which information in the text was attributed to the wrong source in the endnotes.

The work is appropriate for a general, non-specialist audience. Gansler's prose is extremely accessible, suitable even for high school students. Casual Civil War enthusiasts may also enjoy the book, as it offers an overview of Edmonds's story along with a familiar recounting of the events of the eastern theater of the Civil War. Specialists and those already somewhat familiar with Edmonds or other women who served in male disguise during the Civil War may find Edmonds's memoir and the more primary source-based accounts of women soldiers produced by Leonard, Blanton, and Cook more helpful. Edmonds's own memoir would also likely prove more useful for undergraduate instruction.

The Mysterious Private Thompson provides an enjoyable narrative that, while failing to fully unpack the complexities of Edmonds's life, nonetheless reminds readers of her extraordinary experiences and her historical significance.

Notes

[1]. See such recent publications as Lauren Cook Burgess, ed., *An Uncommon Solider: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers, 1862-1864* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of the Solider: Women of the Civil War Armies* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999); Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army*, introduced and annotated by Elizabeth D. Leonard (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999); and DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

[2]. *The Mysterious Private Thompson* is Gansler's second book project. Also see Clara Bingham and Laura Leedy Gansler, *Class Action: The Landmark Case that Changed Sexual Harassment Law* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

[3]. Sylvia G.L. Dannett, *She Rode with the Generals: The True and Incredible Story of Sarah Emma Seelye, alias Franklin Thompson* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960).

[4]. For a particularly insightful account of women's roles and gender ideology in the Civil War era, see Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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