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William J. Christen. *Pauline Cushman: Spy of the Cumberland*. Roseville: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. v + 436 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-889020-11-2.

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Lifting the Veil of a Legend

During the Civil War, “Miss Major” Pauline Cushman, née Harriet Wood, became a national heroine as a Union spy and scout. Cushman entered the U. S. secret service following a fairly successful Midwestern acting career and the death of her husband, Charles C. Dickinson, a member of the 41st Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Christen, an independent scholar of nineteenth-century culture, spent thirteen years researching: where Cushman came from, what the true facts of her Union service were, and what happened to her after the Civil War.

In the first chapters, Christen uncovers Cushman’s real name; place of birth; who her parents were; her marriage to Dickinson, a musician; histories of the theater companies that employed the couple; the Dickinsons’ stage history; etc. Christen analyzes the sometimes conflicting information gleaned from family tradition, playbills and performance reviews, Midwestern newspaper notices, and more.

Following Dickinson’s death from lingering effects of dysentery, Pauline left her two children with her in-laws to go on the Louisville stage. In April 1863, Cushman was recruited as an army detective by Col. Orlando H. Moore, the provost marshal there. Cushman had reported two Confederate parolees who tried to entice her into making pro-Confederate declarations on stage. From this point on, Christen relies heavily on three biographies of Cushman, two autobiographies written in 1864, and a biography published by Ferdinand L. Sarmiento in 1865. Christen also questions which parts, if any, of the Cush-

man/Sarmiento accounts are fictionalized. For example, there is a long discussion as to whether Cushman actually made a Confederate toast on stage (as a ruse to appear as a Confederate sympathizer).

In June 1863, Cushman was sent behind Confederate lines by Army Chief of Police William Truesdail in Nashville to gain information on Confederate General Braxton Bragg’s forces. Aside from the Cushman/Sarmiento accounts, this is best verified by provost marshal records and the memoir of Josiah Conzett of the Fifth Iowa Cavalry. Christen also confirms this reviewer’s research that commanding General William S. Rosecrans used his own private network of scouts, which included women. This would account for the relative dearth of official records on Cushman.[1]

In summary, Cushman traveled to several towns occupied by Bragg’s forces, gathering information on Confederate dispositions and sketching fortifications. She was finally betrayed by a local smuggler and taken to Bragg’s headquarters where her sketches were discovered. After a court martial conviction, Cushman was sentenced to hang. Due to Rosecrans’s onslaught, Bragg was forced to evacuate and Cushman was left at a doctor’s home in Shelbyville, being in ill health due to her confinement. Cushman was rescued when Union forces retook the town. This Tullahoma campaign drove Bragg out of Middle Tennessee into the Chattanooga area.

Christen’s research does generally confirm the Cushman/Sarmiento accounts, as do reprints of newspaper stories published in the North afterward. For instance, at

the opening of the Great Western Sanitary Fair in Cincinnati in December 1863, Rosecrans introduced Cushman, relating her heroics as a spy.

For the next six years, Cushman's war escapades provided material for celebrated tours. She was hired by P. T. Barnum's American Museum in New York City, among other venues, to perform recitations of her army service. In later years she led a peripatetic existence in California and Arizona Territory, working as a hotel/boarding house manager, marrying twice more, and burying an adopted daughter. Her first two children, who remained with her in-laws, also died young. Comments from Western friends and acquaintances finally reveal something of Cushman's personality. By all accounts, she was a strong-willed, good-hearted woman who was willing to help any man or beast in distress. Yet she lived among a rough, hard-drinking, gun-toting crowd and assumed their lifestyle. She was known to referee gunfights. However, one Arizona friend described Cushman as "refined" and her hotel was well-appointed.

Sometime during the night of December 2, 1893, Pauline Cushman Fryer died in San Francisco, at age sixty. She was living in meager circumstances on her government widow's pension in a boardinghouse owned by two close women friends. Although her life had become circumscribed, eight hundred persons attended her funeral, including hundreds of Union veterans and members of the Woman's Relief Corps. Circa 1910, her body was reinterred in the Officer's Circle in the Presidio National Park cemetery. Cushman's tombstone simply reads, "Pauline Fryer, Union Spy."

Regarding the writing of this biography, three issues beg discussion: the detailed research; the general composition of the book; and the truth of Cushman's wartime services and Christen's evaluation of them. Clearly Christen did an extraordinary amount of drudging work to uncover the facts of Cushman's life and he should be applauded for it. But too many original documents are reprinted in full. The general facts of Cushman's life and the author's best judgments about them would have been better handled by summarizing more. And oddly, while Christen detailed the lives of obscure actors, he failed to comment on more pertinent items, such as the play *Maritana, a Drama of the Maid of Saragossa* [*Agustina de Aragón*] and James Montgomery, the notorious Kansas antislavery guerrilla leader (Cushman performed in charity productions for Kansas relief in 1860). Aragón, a legendary Spanish heroine of the Peninsular War, may have served as an inspiration for Cushman and others who as-

sumed nontraditional roles in the Civil War.[2] Christen would have benefited greatly from an editor who could have helped him shape and balance the content of his book.

As to Cushman's legendary reputation, she needs to be judged in the context of other women combatants and known Civil War events. Even though the roles of women (as soldiers, battlefield nurses, scouts, detectives, spies, couriers, guerrillas, smugglers, telegraphers, arsenal workers, etc.) have been fairly well known for a number of years, writers continue to doubt their work and the mass visual media has totally ignored women combatants. At first, even the existence of women soldiers was questioned. Confederate Loreta Janeta Velazquez's autobiography was questioned, largely because Gen. Jubal Early did so in the late nineteenth century. For years, Union spy Elizabeth Van Lew was known as "Crazy Bet," based largely on one comment in the post-war years.[3] Until recently no substantial research had been conducted on many of these women, so ignorance, doubts, and myths—negative and positive—prevailed.

On the other hand, two major biographies, on S. Emma Edmonds (a.k.a., Pvt. Franklin Thompson, 2nd Michigan Infantry) and Velazquez (a.k.a., Lt. Harry Buford, CSA) respectively, were fictionalized in part. So how do we judge Cushman's exploits? I think the answer is judge each major event on its own merits. For example, Christen doubts that Cushman thwarted a plot to poison Union soldiers, but why? In the early fall of 1861, plots to poison Union food supplies were uncovered in Maryland. During the Civil War the number of attempts by slaves to assassinate their masters rose. So this Louisville plot was in line with other events of the period.[4] On the other hand, Christen accepted at face value newspaper reports that Cushman had stolen money and was imprisoned, even though there were no other indications of dishonesty on her part. Similar news reports emerged about Annie Oakley later in her life, too. The criminal turned out to be an impersonator.[5]

As to whether Cushman deserves her legendary reputation, this reviewer's judgment is a qualified yes. She did competently perform the duties of a U.S. detective, like other women, and she did scout behind Confederate lines. Would the Confederates have hanged her? I doubt it. But her imprisonment was as life threatening as the noose, in my judgment. On the other hand, hundreds of women battlefield nurses and soldiers, such as Annie Etheridge of the 5th Michigan Infantry and Jennie Hodgers of the 95th Illinois, served much longer (three

years in their cases) in actual combat.

On balance, William J. Christen's work is a good, but rocky read, given the back and forth of fact-checking, conflicting evidence, and some extraneous material. But, in part, this represents the rough road of Civil War women's history, as mounds of facts must be sifted and winnowed from scores of sources. Yet along the way, readers gain glimpses of the Civil War era rarely seen. In spite of my critiques, I do recommend this work to academic and lay readers alike. Further I commend Christen for making extant facts of Cushman's life that have never before been revealed and for his generally unbiased treatment of her.

Notes

[1]. C. Kay Larson, *South under a Prairie Sky: The Journal of Nell Churchill, U. S. Army Nurse and Scout* (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corp., 2006). Two of Nell Churchill's fictional scouting missions are based in part on Cushman (pp. 245, 251). See Christen, pp. 346-47 n. 3 to confirm Rosecrans's intelligence network.

[2]. Although I am not familiar with this drama, Aragón manned a cannon during the 1808 French siege of Saragossa. She later was commissioned a captain, serving under the Duke of Wellington. Women warriors were common dramatic and literary subjects in Britain and

America from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Emma Edmonds of the 2nd Michigan Infantry was inspired by Maturin Murray Ballou's *Fanny Campbell, or, The Female Pirate Captain* (New York: Samuel French, 1844). See Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 6-9, 21-22, 120-21. Montgomery also later commanded African American troops in South Carolina, employing Harriet Tubman as a lead scout. See C. Kay Larson "Bonny Yank and Ginny Reb," *Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women in the Military* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 45-46.

[3]. Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[4]. C. Kay Larson, *Great Necessities: The Life, Times, and Writings of Anna Ella Carroll, 1815-1894* (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corp., 2004), 299; Larson, "Bonny Yank and Ginny Reb Revisited," 49.

[5]. Glenda Riley, *The Life and Legend of Annie Oakley* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1994), 76-83. On August 11, 1903, articles appeared in two Chicago Hearst newspapers stating that Annie Oakley had been imprisoned for theft to supply her drug habit. Oakley spent six years suing fifty-five papers, winning in fifty-four cases.

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