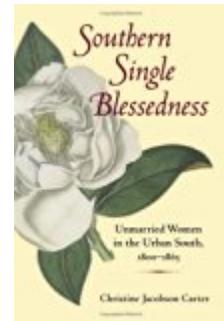


Christine Jacobson Carter. *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South, 1800-1865*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x + 264 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03011-6.

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Husbands Not Required

Plantation myths may conjure up images of southern belles, but women's historians considering the realities of the nineteenth-century South paint another picture. White women's domestic roles on farms and plantations kept them much busier than the stereotypical belle, and the racial hierarchy ingrained in southern culture led to divergent realities for white and black women that historians still work to explain. Much of the historiography on southern women focuses on women who married and helped run the plantations and produce the staple crops of the southern economy. A gap in the historical record remains, however; namely, those women who did not become wives and mothers. Christine Jacobson Carter's work, *Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South, 1800-1865*, considers urban "spinsters" who, for various reasons, chose not to marry. Carter finds that these women negotiated meaningful roles for themselves within southern urban environments. These women upheld the concept of "single blessedness," asserting that a woman could be of value without marriage. Carter submits her study as an addition to scholarship on antebellum southern women who were married.

Carter limits her study to single women in Charleston and Savannah, South Carolina, arguing that these cities provided multiple avenues through which southern women contributed to their communities. These cities were significant seaboard hubs, which, Carter argues, physically connected their female inhabitants to urban northern women, many of whom were also working to define their roles as single women. Carter's study is not

comprehensive. She primarily considers elite women, those with the financial means necessary to guarantee comfortable existences. Carter draws upon the letters and writings of these women, as well as available census records and relevant secondary works, to support her study. She also reveals the extent to which single women involved themselves in social activities and family, and she discusses perceptions of single women and their own ideas about marriage.

Carter begins *Southern Single Blessedness* by juxtaposing the plantation environment with urban society. She mentions particular work patterns associated with a rural woman's daily life and demonstrates that single women living in Savannah and Charleston, while still very much tied to family, had different experiences. Not burdened by the maintenance of farms and plantations, these women could become fully engaged in intellectual pursuits, church membership, and friendships. Carter emphasizes that while the two cities provided single women with opportunities to carry out benevolent work, the cities themselves reinforced southern ideas, including the defense of slavery. Single, affluent women took advantage of the urban environment and its many amenities but did not attack southern social dictums. This set southern unmarried women apart from their northern counterparts, many of whom became involved in abolitionism. This difference helped foster acceptance of southern women who did not follow traditional patterns of marriage and motherhood: although these women chose not to marry, they did not challenge

southern mores, and thus incited no great controversy.

Carter outlines how nineteenth-century literature addressed unmarried women and their potentially positive impact on family and society. She believes that these writings were important, for unmarried women took an active interest in literature that considered women's single status. Carter states: "a number of urban southern women themselves ... contributed to this brightening trend as published authors who, implicitly and explicitly, claimed special moral authority for women" (p. 41).

Carter's work also considers unmarried women's relationships to their families. Women's immediate families provided a substitute for husbands and children. Carter examines several single women who had close relationships with their brothers. These women assumed the role of "pseudo-wife" (p. 66). There existed some reciprocity in these relationships, for often brothers, who traditionally inherited and supervised family fortunes, took care of unwed sisters. Sibling relations could sour when brothers or other relatives failed to provide this service. Nonetheless, fraternal relationships accorded single women male "companionship" and the ability to live "vicariously" through their brothers' lives (p. 66).

Attachments to brothers, sisters, and friends, according to Carter, also affected single women's ideas of marriage. Separation anxieties colored some women's letters, demonstrating how significant family was to these elite single women. Friendships among women were also meaningful. Carter states: "Similar life experiences, a shared language, mutual affection, and the ability to see, or at least write to, each other, brought and held well-to-do women together, whether within families or across familial and geographical divides" (p. 10).

In addition, strong familial bonds led single women to form maternal attachments to nieces and nephews. In some instances, single women aided in raising the children of deceased relatives—a circumstance that Carter suggests made these women helpful to their societies. Spinsters followed traditional southern customs (albeit in different ways) by maintaining family ties even if they did not take husbands. Focusing on family, as well as friendships single women formed with other females, provided unmarried women social connections but never undermined the idea that marriage should be the primary goal for all women. Carter suggests that single women were able to negotiate roles for themselves within this marriage-centered society by focusing attention on ways to help their families and communities.

Yet another way that unmarried women felt that they contributed to society was through benevolent work. Carter explains how women gave to their communities through churches, non-church related organizations, and individual efforts. Women's involvement in church certainly facilitated their participation in charitable organizations, but the Ladies Benevolent Society also provided single women with an opportunity to lend their services to their communities while cultivating leadership skills. Carter demonstrates that conservatism influenced women's benevolence work: they did not set out to upset the prevailing patriarchal power structure but to help communities through charitable endeavors.

Finally, Carter cites the drastic changes that occurred during the Civil War as a turning point for all southern women. Discourse regarding single women in particular changed. Carter explains that wartime needs for nurses and the like allowed single women to involve themselves in patriotic endeavors by fulfilling charitable roles they had carried out in some form before the war. Further, changes in society certainly focused a different kind of attention on single women. The uncertainty of war, coupled with men's absence, led to "disillusionment" regarding southern males (p. 165). Carter states: "Unmarried women in particular could be especially candid about men's deficiencies for a variety of reasons. They had no husbands or sons to protect ... and they felt the need to justify their unmarried state" (p. 164).

Letters and writings provide an engaging look at elite single women's thoughts on friendship, romance, and community, but one wonders how different life was for single, non-elite women. Carter's research encapsulates only a segment of women within urban society. She does make reference to less affluent females and emphasizes that socioeconomic status was a factor in urban single women's experiences. In addition, with regard to the two cities of Charleston and Savannah, Carter states: "Of course, the uniqueness of these urban settings naturally limit, or at least qualify, generalizations about women's experiences there to other areas, but they remind us that the region was a complex and diverse place" (p. 5). Carter is careful to outline the scope of her work, and she describes how the availability of sources and correspondence among elite women factored into her study. As Carter acknowledges, *Southern Single Blessedness* makes clear that studies of non-elite unmarried women are needed (p. 8).

The greatest strength of Carter's work is her ability to argue convincingly against the existence of a univer-

sally negative perception of unmarried women in the antebellum South. Even Carter acknowledges that these women did not escape teasing or speculation, but she demonstrates that single women contributed meaningfully to their society. Carter's book shifts the historiographical focus from rural wives to city spinsters. When read in conjunction with major works such as Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (1970), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988), and Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress:*

Women's World in the Old South (1982), Carter's work expands our knowledge of southern women.

In short, Carter provides a well-written, well-researched study of elite unmarried women in Charleston and Savannah that suggests that marital status did not prevent these women from feeling that they could be useful to society. The author certainly argues convincingly for the varied nature of nineteenth-century women's lives, making her work a good addition to the existing scholarship on southern women.

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