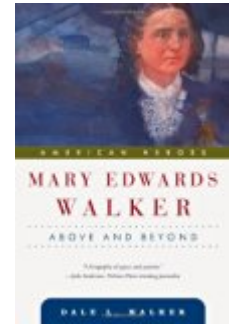


Dale L. Walker. *Mary Edwards Walker: Above and Beyond*. New York: Forge Books, 2005. 221 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7653-1065-1.

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The Elusive Mary Walker

Although author Dale L. Walker is not related to Mary Edwards Walker, the tone of this biography is largely celebratory. Written primarily for a general audience, this book is the fourth offering in the American Heroes Series, published by Forge Books. Walker, the series' general editor, argues that Mary Walker was a woman ahead of her time who led an extraordinary and heroic existence. The broad outlines of her long life seem to conform to the author's assertion: she graduated from Syracuse Medical College in 1855, she boldly advocated a broad range of rights for women, and she served as a physician—and perhaps a spy—during the Civil War, for which she was awarded the Medal of Honor. Yet, there is much about Mary Walker that is elusive. As the author correctly points out, she held extremely unconventional views on a variety of topics, and some contemporaries deemed her a meddling, obstreperous, “professional scold who was perhaps insane” (p. 22). And, although the author asserts that Walker's unique life “requires no invention,” paltry evidence forced him to speculate widely throughout the work (p. 17).

Walker was born on November 26, 1832, in Oswego, New York, and reared on her parents' Bunker Hill Farm. Here, father Alvah inspired his daughter's most defining characteristics: her love of medicine and her abhorrence of female attire. After a brief teaching stint in the nearby village of Minetto, Walker gained admission to Syracuse Medical College in December 1853. The three thirteen-week terms at Syracuse included traditional instruction in pathology, obstetrics, anatomy, and principles of surgery, yet also borrowed heavily from other

“schools” of medical thought prevalent in nineteenth-century United States. Thus, through the “eclectic” system of medicine taught at Syracuse, Walker was exposed to herbalism (the use of plants and herbs to treat ailments) and homeopathy (the application of a single medicine to treat the patient after intensive observation of symptoms). The “eclectic” system, moreover, eschewed the “heroic” treatments of bloodletting and blistering, and the use of purgatives since eclectic practitioners deemed them too invasive. The author asserts that Walker's medical education not only awakened her natural self-confidence, but also put her on a collision course with the male doctors she would encounter in Civil War hospital tents, most of whom practiced “heroic” or allopathic medicine.

After her graduation in June 1855, Walker suffered a series of setbacks, yet these failures “merely girded her for future battles” (p. 56). The most notable of these was an ill-fated marriage to Syracuse classmate Albert Miller, a “shadowy figure” whose infidelity heavily influenced Walker's ideas about marriage and divorce (p. 62). It was during this part of her life that Walker adopted her self-styled “reform dress,” which would eventually include “a swallowtail coat over trousers, a boiled white shirt and stiff collar, necktie, waistcoat (with a watch chain across the front), and a silk topper” (p. 58). Touting the health benefits of such attire to audiences far and wide (and apparently impervious to the ridicule meted out by myriad naysayers), Walker argued that conventional female garb caused health problems and adversely affected women's moods, rendering marriages unhappy. Walker's insis-

tence on the primacy of female dress reform over all other initiatives—even the right to vote—alienated most suffrage activists and increasingly placed her on the margins of the woman’s movement, despite her impassioned pleas for abolition, temperance, and education reform.

The chapters chronicling Walker’s late antebellum and Civil War years are the most compelling, yet the most frustrating, of the book. The author undertakes a very careful examination of Walker’s writings for the woman’s magazine *Sibyl*, exposing, among other themes, her critique of the sexual double standard as exemplified by the so-called Sickles Tragedy. (In the spring of 1859, Daniel Sickles, later the commander of the Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac, shot and killed his wife’s lover). The author missed an opportunity here, since Walker and Sickles had several interesting connections, including adulterous spouses, amputation (Sickles’s wound at Gettysburg led to the amputation of his right leg; Walker condemned amputation and other “heroic” measures as quackery), and the Medal of Honor (Sickles received the award in 1897, while Walker received it in 1866). Yet, the author convincingly argues that Walker’s experiences during the Civil War were “the decisive turning point in her life,” and he is at his best when describing Walker’s perseverance in the face of Union medical officers’ determined opposition to her presence in hospital wards (p. 82).

The book has several shortcomings, namely the

lack of engagement with recent scholarship examining women’s involvement in Civil War medical care.[1] The author is certainly correct in stating that Walker faced discrimination at the hands of Union officials because she was a woman, but she was not unique in this regard. Moreover, the book contains entire chapters (such as chapter two, “Blackwell,” which delves into the life of Elizabeth Blackwell) that are only marginally relevant to Walker’s life. Finally, the book contained some erroneous facts, such as the sixteen thousand Union deaths listed for the battle of Second Bull Run and some puzzling phrases: Mary Walker “was in Oswego on election day in November 1864, casting her vote for Lincoln” (p. 156). Still, with these criticisms aside, *Mary Edwards Walker* offers an interesting look into the life of a woman who, according to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, “lived a life of determined unconventionality” (p. 9).

Note

[1]. See, for example John R. Brumgardt, ed., *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980); Harold Elk Straubling, *In Hospital and Camp: The Civil War through the Eyes of its Doctors and Nurses* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1993); and especially Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

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