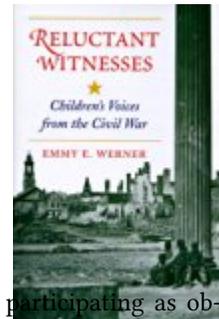


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emily E. Werner. *Reluctant Witnesses: Children's Voices from the Civil War*. New York: Westview Press, 1998. xi + 175. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-2822-5.

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At the height of the siege of Vicksburg, Mary Loughborough's little daughter lightened the horror of the daily shelling when she befriended a Confederate soldier, who brought her flowers, an apple, and even a pet mockingbird. She learned his name and delighted to see him leading his commander's horse to water. One morning, as she watched, he carried an unexploded Yankee shell down a hill. It exploded, tearing off both his hands. "He screamed, "Where are you boys? Oh, I am hurt. God have mercy!" The little girl, obviously stunned and terrified, cried, "O mamma, poor Henry's killed! Now he'll die, mamma. Oh, poor Henry!" (p. 88).

A year later and hundreds of miles to the east, foragers from William T. Sherman's army discovered two little girls, about three and five years old, alone in a ramshackle log cabin. Their muddy, torn clothes were made of crude sacks with holes torn out for the arms. The parents never appeared, and the soldiers eagerly adopted the girls, washing them up, feeding them, stealing clothing for them, and taking them along on their "March to the Sea." The orphans were eventually adopted by another family when the army reached Savannah.

Revealing that children actually shared their parents' Civil War in horrifying and exciting ways is this book's main contribution to the literature on the Civil War. Emily E. Werner has combed scores of mostly published memoirs, diaries, and letters for the pathos and adventure experienced by children—black and white, northern and southern—during the conflict. In doing so, she has actually found a new topic in a crowded, extremely active field of study. Children comprised nearly a third of the population of the United States in 1860 and, as a result, were everywhere during the Civil War; even a cursory glance at the woodcuts and photographs that illustrate

our images of the war show them participating as observers and as actors. Boys formed their own military companies and girls knitted socks for soldiers; they were refugees and prisoners, factory workers and speakers at patriotic school programs. Werner also includes African-American children, whose lives on the frightening frontier between slavery and freedom rendered their experiences unique among Civil War children.

Although the affecting stories she tells deepen our understanding of the Civil War—historians have, heretofore, virtually ignored Civil War children—*Reluctant Witnesses* has a number of limitations. The long block quotes and emphasis on individual stories gives the book an episodic quality, and the author also relies too exclusively on passive verbs. There are virtually no footnotes, which means when, for instance, she refers to exaggerated claims that up to 20 percent of Civil War soldiers were under-aged boys, the reader has no idea where she found that statistic. In fact, her insistence that so many soldiers were actually boys is misleading; virtually no one has actually examined the ages of Civil War armies, although they seem to have been older, on average, than the draftees sent to Vietnam. Bell I. Wiley's long-ago sampling of Confederate soldiers suggested that 5 percent were under the age of eighteen, while a U.S. Sanitary Commission actuary's admittedly low estimate held that only 1 percent of Union soldiers were under eighteen. [Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1943), p. 331, and *The Life of Billy Yank* (1952), p. 299].

The most important shortcoming of the book, however, is the overwhelming attention paid to the military side of the war. Most of Werner's witnesses are young soldiers and drummer boys or southern children living in the paths of the invading Union armies. Many, in fact,

are adults—soldiers and parents—who reported on the experiences and responses of children. Werner shapes most of her chapters around battles and campaigns, for which she provides very general accounts, and her selections generally describe the death and mayhem spawned by combat. These dramatic episodes and stark memories certainly pack an emotional wallop, but, by stressing military events over civilian affairs, the unique experiences of children are lost. Drummer boys describing the carnage in the Wilderness sound a lot like grizzled sergeants; a ten-year-old girl describing her cave life in Vicksburg sounds much like an adult who shared the same danger and tension; the words of black children who lived in the squalid contraband camps near Union strongholds are indistinguishable from those of their elders. By casting a wider net—by not restricting her study to children who experienced only the sharp end of war—Werner could have constructed a much more useful book.

Of course, this kind of criticism veers dangerously close to attacking the author for not writing an entirely different book. Yet there *Reluctant Witnesses* suffers from another serious problem. In her prologue, the author suggests that she will show children’s “astonishing resilience in the face of great adversity” and hints that she will demonstrate how “the bonds of family and community and the power of faith ... helped them survive” (p. 5).

Indeed, Werner is a developmental psychologist who has published books about at-risk children, and since many Civil War-era children were “at risk” in the deepest sense of the word, her expertise would be welcome. Yet Werner applies none of her professional knowledge of children’s psychology to the analysis of what children experienced and how they responded to the challenges they faced. Her epilogue briefly summarizes the adult lives of some of her informants and makes vague references to the coping mechanisms of children during other wars (particularly in the twentieth century). By themselves, these stories are certainly poignant and often quite moving; with the kind of analysis introduced in the prologue and epilogue, but unrealized in the main body of the book, they would have been even more meaningful. Late in the book, the author rather unaccountably suggests that most Civil War children, like ten-year-old Carrie Berry of Atlanta, “never lost a child’s enthusiasm and gift of life” (p. 154). That may well be true, but there is far more to learn about the children of the Civil War than that they bucked up, kept stiff upper lips, and eventually came out of it all right.

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