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Sarah Wilkerson Freeman, Beverly Greene Bond, eds. *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. 456 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2949-9.

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Beyond the Usual Suspects

As the historian Margaret Ripley Wolfe observes in the prologue to her seminal *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women*, the story of women in the American South "is one of hardships, endurance, fortitude, triumphs, and, above all, survival–a testament to the extraordinary lives of ordinary people."[1] In *Tennessee Women*, coeditors Sarah Wilkerson Freeman and Beverly Greene Bond invite readers on a fascinating journey across more than two centuries of the history of women in the Volunteer State. They admirably succeed in their mission, which is to awaken "a heightened sense of place, a greater appreciation of the role of gender and race in the stories of our lives, and a clearer understanding of the uniqueness of Tennessee history" (p. ix).

Freeman, Bond, and their colleagues offer eighteen biographical essays that convey the richness of women's experience in Tennessee. The book's subjects include native daughters as well as women who spent considerable portions of their careers in the state. There are stars and supporting players; the usual suspects as well as intriguing newcomers to the narrative of Tennessee history. For every familiar character–Frances Wright of Nashoba commune or the writer Wilma Dykeman, for example–there are other women finally receiving their historical due, including environmentalist Doris Bradshaw and women's rights activists Sue Shelton White and Charl Ormond Williams.

Coeditors Freeman, an associate professor of history at Arkansas State University, and Bond, director of African and African American Studies at the University of Memphis, have fulfilled their commitment to offer representative women from the three principal geographic regions of the state (East, Middle, and West Tennessee). Their subjects come from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, including Nan-ye-hi (Nancy Ward), the "Beloved Woman" of the Cherokee; Milly Swan Price, a free woman of color; and Jocelyn Dan Wurzburg, an elite white Memphian who embraced civil rights and feminist activism in 1968 in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in her hometown. Intentionally missing from these pages are extended portraits of women during the Civil War. As Freeman explains in the preface, "Our authors preferred to focus on the very long journey from slavery and slaveholding to a society that valued freedom in equal measure for all" (p. xiv).

In a review of limited length it would be difficult, if not impossible, to discuss adequately the contributions each author has made in placing these Tennessee women against the backdrop of state and national events. Suffice it to say, there is not a ringer among the eighteen essays. Each is informed by the most recent scholarship in the fields of American women's history, southern history, and the history of Tennessee.

Each person who turns to this volume–and the work deserves a wide audience–will doubtless come away with his or her favorite essays. I found three in particular to be especially meaningful. Two of the women profiled, Phoebe Fairgrave Omlie and Wilma Rudolph, were exemplars of physical talent and endurance. Another, Alberta Hunter, garnered national, and indeed international, acclaim as a blues vocalist.

Janann Sherman, chair of the History Department at the University of Memphis, includes in her opening paragraph this arresting statement about Omlie: "She was one of the most famous women in America in 1931, but she had long since faded into obscurity by the time she died in 1975" (p. 119). Although a native of Memphis, I must confess that I had never heard of Omlie, who spent much of her career in that city. Sherman took me on a wild ride, as the eighteen-year-old Phoebe Fairgrave purchased an airplane in 1920 and quickly became one of the nation's foremost stuntwomen. Signed to a contract with Fox Film Corporation, she danced the Charleston, stood

on her head on the wings of aircraft, and performed all manner of daredevil stunts in silent pictures. She married her personal pilot, Vernon Omlie, a World War I veteran, and formed the Phoebe Fairgrave Flying Circus, which performed at shows and county fairs across the nation. In 1927, she became the first American woman to receive a transport pilot's license. That same year, during the devastating Mississippi River flood, she flew relief missions, picking up stranded refugees and dropping food and supplies to people in distress up and down the river.

In the late twenties and early thirties, Omlie achieved even greater renown piloting *Miss Memphis* in numerous air races, during which she earned substantial prize money and bested all comers, male and female. Her celebrity led Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1932 presidential campaign to solicit her help, which resulted in her being rewarded with a federal job. She was named liaison between the Bureau of Air Commerce and the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the predecessor of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). As Sherman observes, "Adding to her long list of firsts, Phoebe became the first woman in the federal government to hold an official post connected with aviation" (p. 131). Sadly, Omlie ended her days in Indianapolis as a virtual recluse, battling poverty and alcoholism.

Courage and endurance were also the hallmarks of native Tennessean Rudolph, the subject of an insightful essay by Aram Goudsouzian of the University of Memphis. Rudolph entered the world as she would leave it: fighting. Born prematurely and weighing a mere four and one-half pounds, she was the daughter of Ed Rudolph, a railroad porter, and his second wife, Blanche, a domestic servant. (Wilma was the twentieth of twenty-two children sired by Ed.) At age four, a life-threatening bout with double pneumonia and scarlet fever left Wilma with a twisted and partially paralyzed leg. Two years later she was fitted with a special brace that allowed more mobility. She also benefited from therapeutic massages that she received at Meharry Medical College, the noted black hospital in Nashville. Yet Rudolph bore psychological scars from the taunting she received from her playmates.

Life changed for Rudolph as she entered the seventh grade. Her leg sufficiently healed, she joined the girls' basketball team, which also entailed running track. She quickly excelled as a natural sprinter. While still in high school in Clarksville, she was chosen for the United States Olympic team that competed in Melbourne in 1956. That same year she met the man who had broken the color barrier in major league baseball. "Jackie Robinson, after that day," she recalled, "was my first black hero" (p. 310). In Rome in 1960, the twenty-year-old Rudolph became the first American woman to win three gold medals in one Olympics. Recognizing her status as an international icon, the U.S. Department of State later sent the Tennessean on a goodwill tour through five African countries.

Despite Rudolph's record-setting accomplishments, she never reaped the financial rewards given other athletes. As author Goudsouzian explains, Rudolph's race and gender "constricted her marketability" (p. 321). She supported herself by teaching grade school and coaching basketball and track. After a brief stint working for the Job Corps, the divorced mother of four lectured on college campuses around the country. Tragically, she succumbed to brain cancer in 1994 at age fifty-four. Her legacy as a trailblazer in women's sports lives on, however, in more than a dozen children's books that celebrate her inspiring story.

Unlike Rudolph, the blues singer Hunter was granted a long and productive career. As Michelle R. Scott of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, makes clear, few at Hunter's birth in 1895 could have predicted the international fame that would come to the native Memphian. Growing up when Jim Crow was perhaps at its most odious, Hunter immersed herself in the vibrant music scene of Beale Street centering around W. C. Handy's bandstand. A school dropout in her early teen years, she moved at age sixteen to Chicago, where she eked out a living as a domestic worker and managed to avoid having to take up prostitution. By World War I, she had risen to the top of the black music scene by introducing Chicago audiences to such Handy standards as "St. Louis Blues" and "Beale Street Blues." In 1921, Hunter moved to New York City to record her first phonograph album. A featured role in a Broadway musical soon followed.

Like other black artists, Hunter was drawn to the acceptance and acclaim of European audiences. She resided in Paris and London in the late twenties and throughout the Great Depression. Appearing alongside Paul Robeson and other notables, she entertained royalty and became an international favorite. She embraced the equality of European society. She wrote to a New York newspaper that she had no plans to return home. "I am mad for the freedom of Paris," she said. "Color means nothing over here" (p. 109).

Hunter returned to the United States as the European war approached. She entertained for the United Service Organizations (USO) during World War II and the Ko-

rean War. In the 1950s, her career slowed as musical tastes changed. At the same time her enthusiasm for performing waned. She found an unlikely new outlet for her prodigious energy and talent: nursing. At sixty-one she lied about her age–saying she was fifty–when she applied for a practical nursing course. After graduating she worked for twenty years as a scrub nurse at Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island in New York. In 1977, she was forced to retire when the hospital thought she was seventy. She was, in fact, eighty-two.

Over the next seven years she enjoyed an unexpected third career as she was discovered anew by a younger generation of blues enthusiasts. She performed at home and abroad and appeared occasionally on television. Twice she performed for the Carters at the White House. Throughout her life Hunter never lost her love for the South or her native Tennessee. Shortly before her death in 1984, she directed a Memphis reporter, "Tell Memphis … I'm still their child" (p. 114).

Thanks to Freeman and Bond and their colleagues, those who revere the history of Tennessee and the South–or merely enjoy stories well told–can savor in one volume the lives of eighteen of the region's most fascinating women.

Note

[1]. Margaret Ripley Wolfe, *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 1.

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