

H-Net Reviews

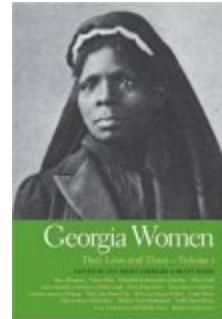
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ann Short Chirhart, Betty Wood, eds. *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times, Volume 1*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. 392 pp. \$69.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-8203-3336-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3337-3.

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New Collection on Georgia Women Covers Broad Territory

Georgia Women offers rich essays on eighteen diverse women from the colonial era through the end of World War I. The depth of thought from the contributing scholars equals the complexities of the women they write about, which is no mean feat. These Georgia women come through the pages of history with elbows out—vivid, extraordinarily persistent, deeply flawed, sometimes funny, and uncommonly canny.

The choice of Susie King Taylor's resolute face for the cover of this collection signals that this history of Georgia women is not limited to the real-life counterparts of Scarlett O'Hara or the women whose family names grace prominent buildings around the state. Catherine Clinton describes how as a mere fourteen-year-old Susie King Taylor escaped slavery in coastal Georgia and married a soldier in one of the first black Union regiments. She worked in the Union enclave of Port Royal, South Carolina, throughout the Civil War as a nurse, teacher, and laundress. The record of her life survives, as is the case with many of the other women in this collection, because she penned a memoir of her experiences.

An introduction to this collection by co-editors Ann Short Chirhart and Betty Wood provides context, painting the larger canvas upon which these Georgia women appear. In addition to Susie King Taylor, these essays explore the lives of Mary Musgrove, Nancy Hart, Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston, Ellen

Craft, Fanny Kemble and her daughter Frances Leigh Butler, Eliza Frances Andrews, Amanda America Dickson, Mary Gay, Rebecca Latimer Felton and her sister Mary Latimer McClendon, Nellie Peters Black, Lucy Craft Laney, Martha Berry, Corra Harris, and Juliette Gordon Low. Black and white images of each woman accompany the essays, and an up-to-date bibliography of primary and secondary sources will be of interest to future researchers.

While this collection speaks primarily to scholars and students, the compelling stories of many of these women may well appeal to general readers of history, too. Who wouldn't enjoy encountering Georgia women trapping British soldiers at gunpoint, escaping slavery by cross-dressing as white men, smuggling newspapers under long skirts in the heat of an Atlanta summer to deliver news to Confederate soldiers, defying racial and class categorization in Reconstruction-era Augusta, taking revenge on "Yankees" with the pen, forging national and international ties, and, of course, starting and sustaining schools and charitable organizations of various stripes?

Essays that focus on some of the better-known figures, like Mary Musgrove, Fanny Kemble, and Juliette Low, take fresh approaches. Julie Anne Sweet juxtaposes conflicting views of Mary Musgrove. Born to a Creek Indian mother, Musgrove mediated between British officials and Native American groups as she ac-

quired lands, husbands, and more than a few enemies in her long life. At the other end of the time period covered in this collection, we discover that Juliette Gordon Low, the celebrated force behind the Girl Scouts, was not quite the trailblazer one might think. Anastasia Hodgens Sims underscores the irony of Low's lack of interest in the social reform movements of her era, until the trials of physical disability and a philandering husband dropped the Savannah socialite, past mid-life, on an unmarked trail.

Some essays cover more biographical territory by taking on two women. Readers may be surprised to see Fanny Kemble included in this collection, since the British actress actually resided in Georgia only a few months. Her memoir about her time on her husband's coastal Georgia plantation, however, was highly influential, as Daniel Kilbride notes in his essay on Kemble and her daughter Frances Butler Leigh. But the real value of his exploration stems from the complexity of his consideration of regional identification. Certainly, because of poverty, enslavement, and geographic isolation, many Georgians had little choice about their regional identity. The mobility of the planter class and the reality of northern/southern intermarriage in the Kemble-Leigh case, however, opened up an element of choice and thus offers a window for considering the meaning of "southern" and "northern."

The other essay in this collection that considers two figures, "Lighting Fires of Knowledge" by Jennifer Lund Smith, stresses vocational identity rather than kinship ties. The lives of two innovators in education, Lucy Craft Laney (who worked with and for African American children in Augusta) and Martha Berry (who worked with and for poor white children in North Georgia) make for an interesting comparison. These women rode some of the same cultural currents, despite the profound differences in their racial and economic backgrounds.

The essays in *Georgia Women* include some thoughtful explorations of what it means to "make history." Donald Mathews's beautifully written portrait of the life of Corra Harris is fascinating in its attempt to untangle the twisted skeins of racist ideology and personal tragedy in that writer's life and work. I also enjoyed the analysis of Civil War author and Decatur resident Mary Gay by Michelle Gillespie. To support herself and survivors of the war, Gay crossed the line of propriety for upper-class white women, stepping bod-

ily into traditionally male public spaces. She traveled a great deal, first selling Bibles and raising funds for her church and later hawking her own memoirs. Her articulation of her loss, particularly of her Confederate brother's death, fed the growing mythology of the "Lost Cause." Yet, as Gillespie, argues, ultimately Gay "is significant to historians less for her public work and ideology, which is not so unique in the end, than for her construction of a special role for herself as sales agent, breadwinner, and independent woman through her marketing of the memory of the Civil War dead" (p. 218).

As Gillespie's point suggests, historians in this volume recognize the role of myth-making in the lives of their subjects. Thus, another recurring theme involves the interpretive decisions historians face when sifting through sometimes vague or contradictory evidence. John Thomas Scott's piece on Nancy Hart traces the lineage of this Revolutionary heroine's legend through accounts of historians, journalists, and popular writers like Joel Chandler Harris, as well that of early feminists and members of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Similarly, Barbara McCaskill offers a nuanced consideration of the amazing life of Ellen Craft, who escaped slavery in 1848 by cross-dressing as an ill planter traveling north for medical care, accompanied by a slave (who was actually Ellen's husband William). Like many of the historians in this volume, McCaskill closely analyzes the memoirs and other published accounts and photographs, including their omissions and their reception by various audiences. Recognizing the complexity of the kinship ties and ideological pressures that shaped Ellen Craft's circumstances, McCaskill raises thoughtful questions about the gray areas that emerge about her life.

Defiance of racial and class boundaries looms large in Kent Anderson Leslie's account of a relatively little-known figure, Amanda America Dickinson. Unlike many children of enslaved mothers and white slave-owning fathers, Dickinson eventually inherited her father's economic and class privilege and thrived as a wealthy woman of color in Augusta during the Reconstruction era.

Despite this fine collection's effort toward inclusiveness, many stories of Georgia women remain untold. The lives of the majority of Georgia women from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth century simply left fainter traces than those of the rela-

tively few who wrote memoirs or preserved their letters and property records. So, we must wonder how the life stories of less literate women—the myriad farmers, sharecroppers, cooks, midwives, and prostitutes—might add to the picture of early Georgia women. Certainly more work remains to be done to better understand the complexity of intimate relationships between women.

On a final note, the University of Georgia Press deserves praise for bringing out this series on southern women's lives. A search for other works dedicated to a broad coverage of Georgia women turned up no other

scholarly histories collected in one volume. A rare precursor volume dates back to the 1920s and apparently was designed primarily as a reference for society-page journalists. The glossy pictures of the women in that collection include no black faces. What is more, the biographical sketches avoid all controversy and do not stretch beyond hagiography. The striking contrast between that early twentieth-century representation of Georgia women and the provocative biographies in this volume testifies to the terrific amount of work accomplished in the field over the last several decades.

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