

H-Net Reviews

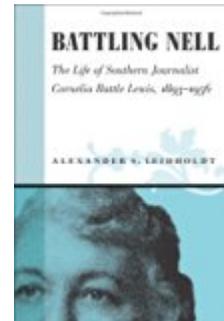
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexander S. Leidholdt. *Battling Nell: The Life of Southern Journalist Cornelia Battle Lewis, 1893-1956*. Southern Biography Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. 331 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3455-9.

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Putting Politics on the Society Pages: The Story of Nell Battle Lewis

In *Battling Nell*, Alexander S. Leidholdt tells the fascinating story of a groundbreaking newspaper columnist's relationship with the white southern patriarchy amid roiling debates over religion, labor relations, and integration. But the book is not just about Cornelia Battle Lewis (1893-1956). It is also about the intersection of gender, class, and race in the industrialized South, and that makes it an important contribution to the scholarship about journalism history and women in journalism.

Leidholdt makes his meticulous research accessible to the general reader by weaving important social and political context into Lewis's life story, adding depth and texture to what readers already know about the Jim Crow South. Still, academic historians will gain the most from this important project. The work is of special interest to women's historians, journalism historians, and even political scientists, who may appreciate how key political maneuverings late in the book foreshadow the South's realignment from a Democratic to a Republican stronghold. The principal story, of course, is Lewis herself and how this upper-class southern woman wrestled with the politics of gender, race, and class in her life and in her writing.

Lewis was born into a distinguished North Carolina family that believed in the dominant ideology of southern white womanhood. Her father, a prominent medical doctor and public health official, disapproved of a college education for women and, despite his progressive agenda

to improve public health and record keeping in his state, "sought to preserve the legacy of the Southern Lady" (p. 9). Lewis broke out of the circumscribed life she had inherited by graduating from Smith College, serving overseas with the YMCA, and becoming North Carolina's first female newspaper columnist.

In 1920, Lewis entered the offices of the liberal-leaning *Raleigh News and Observer* on an impulse. She was hired as a reporter and was eventually made society editor, where she began publishing her column, "Incidentally," in the space allotted to her. The newspaper's publisher, Josephus Daniels, described Lewis's hire to readers as a logical step toward the day when women would be an "equal partner in governmental housekeeping" (pp. 59-60). However, Daniels could not have predicted just how influential Lewis was to become.

Lewis used her column as a platform from which to address the most important political issues of the day. She became a leading voice in southern liberalism in the twenties and thirties, eschewing parochial sentimentality and encouraging a cultural revival in the South. She quickly gained a regional reputation. With wit and sarcasm, Lewis frequently skewered the Ku Klux Klan and other reactionaries. In one column, she wrote: "'Kourageous Ku Klux Knights Konfer/On English words, and, Kareless flout 'em/And Konduct of that Kind doth Kause/The Kritic to write verse about 'em'" (p. 69).

Lewis also ridiculed those who opposed the teaching of evolution. She did not believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, which put her at odds with the majority in her state, and did not consider Darwinian theory incompatible with monotheism. Perhaps her greatest badge of liberalism was her coverage of the Loray Mill strike in 1929. She defended the workers despite threats to her own safety and reputation, blaming mill owners for poor working conditions and officials for mistreating protesters and inciting mob violence. She called Gaston County, where the mill was located, a barbarous embarrassment to the state.

Given the sharpness with which Lewis attacked powerful conservatives in her younger years, her political transformation in the late thirties came as a shock. After a leave of absence from her column—and several hospitalizations related to her precarious mental health—Lewis recanted her hard-argued progressive positions. Whereas once she had disdained regional romanticism, now she wrote: “The Confederate flag is a beautiful flag, the most moving in the world. How about that, ‘Liberals’? Isn’t it distressing to see a person who ought to know better attached with such rank sentiment to the reactionary past!” (p. 207). She said her columns during the mill strike had been those of a Communist dupe. She fiercely opposed the integration of schools, and, near the end of her life, she encouraged “massive resistance” to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). She ended her career as a champion of racial segregation and parochial conservatism.

This political about-face drives the book’s narrative and Leidholdt’s analysis. Leidholdt considers Lewis’s mental illness as a possible catalyst for her change in viewpoint, but he does so with care and nuance. Acknowledging the danger in diagnosing a biographical subject long after she has lived, Leidholdt simply lays out the facts about Lewis’s behavior and compares them with the characteristics of bipolar disorder. It is easy to imagine how the illness might explain Lewis’s behavior. However, Lewis’s race, class, and gender certainly played important roles, and Leidholdt is careful not to take contemporary assessments of Lewis’s mental health at face value.

Historically, radical women have often been discredited under the auspices of mental illness. Lewis was an unabashed feminist as a young woman, and this alone

would have caused more traditional southerners to question her sanity. However, the periodic bouts of instability that led to Lewis’s institutionalization do indicate the presence of illness. Without attributing Lewis’s new opinions to the illness itself, Leidholdt suggests the experience may have influenced her in other ways.

For example, anyone of influence in North Carolina would have known about Lewis’s institutionalization and thus may have used it to dismiss her liberal ideas as those of a madwoman. Thus, upon returning to her column, it would have been politically safer for her to espouse conservative beliefs, a thought that may have occurred to her. Second, Leidholdt points out that Lewis was financially dependent on her family while she was hospitalized and afterward. This dependence might have encouraged her to hew more closely to their traditional beliefs. Finally, by Lewis’s admission, she associated her former liberal self with her mental health battles. In trying to avoid repeating a painful period of her life, she may have sought to reverse everything she had once believed.

Whatever the reason behind the transformation, Lewis was influential from the time she began typing her column until her death of a heart attack. She broke a massive barrier for women by seizing the small microphone the newspaper had given her and turning it into a bullhorn. In fact, Leidholdt might have underplayed the significance of the column’s location. Many readers, Lewis among them, disparaged a newspaper’s society pages—“the women’s pages”—as being of little consequence. Lewis demonstrated how a woman could take a space conceptualized as an extension of women’s domestic sphere and use it to claim a large public presence.

Many biographies define their subjects narrowly and thus are useful only when added to a shelf of other biographies for meta-analysis. Leidholdt avoids that, making this book a meaningful contribution on its own and a riveting read. His expansive description of social and political context takes the book beyond the story of one person and gives the reader a sense of the larger landscape. By problematizing race, gender, and class, Leidholdt has produced a case study of intersectionality and how it operated in the South after industrialization. He uses the individual narrative as a lens through which to examine time and place, humanizing and deepening readers’ understanding of the past. Along the way, readers also come to know a unique and complex woman.

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