

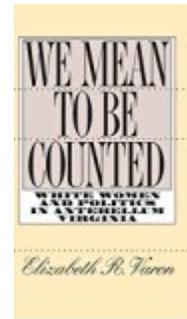
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Elizabeth R. Varon. *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. x + 234 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-2390-3.

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Southern Ladies as Political Amazons

“We are the nursing mothers of heroes, statesmen, and divines,” asserted Lucy Barbour, a plantation mistress and mother of seven children, in 1844. “While we perform a task so important, we mean to be counted something in the muster-roll of man” (p. 89). Barbour is only one of many fascinating individuals who inhabit the pages of Elizabeth R. Varon’s new study of southern women. In this exciting new book, we also meet domestic advice-book author Virginia Cary; Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford, a critic of slavery and an advocate of colonization; widow Judith Rives, who “fancied herself her husband’s political conscience” (p. 73) and, after his death, became a pro-slavery author and an officer of the Mount Vernon Association; Lucy Kenney, a Whig publicist; novelist Martha Fenton Hunter; Rebecca Brodnax Hicks, editor of the controversial Kaleidoscope paper; and many other less prominent Virginia women who insisted on a public voice on the most pressing issues facing their state, their region, and their nation.

In *We Mean To Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, Elizabeth R. Varon documents white women’s “active, distinct, and evolving role in the political life of the Old South” (p. 1). Focusing on slaveholding, middle-class and elite white women in Virginia, Varon persuasively argues that southern ladies were conservative, but not passive, members of the Old Dominion’s political culture. Varon goes beyond documenting white women’s presence in politics to show how women’s role in politics evolved alongside the rise of the second party system, sectionalism, and southern nation-

alism. Working in charitable enterprises, the colonization movement, the electoral campaigns of 1840 and 1860, and as novelists, essayists, and historical preservationists, women in antebellum Virginia established a concept of “female civic duty” (p. 2) that assigned them an active role in the public sphere.

In her first chapter, Varon examines the “evangelical empire” (p. 25) that women carved out for themselves in benevolence and moral reform. Building on the work of Suzanne Lebsock and Lori Ginzberg, she shows that charitable women were able to establish themselves as public authorities, propertyholders, and politically savvy fundraisers.[1] While Varon’s focus, like Lebsock’s, is on Virginia’s urban centers, she suggests that white women’s advocacy of temperance included many rural women as well. However, as charges of abolitionism and feminism caused the Virginia Temperance Society to founder, the “evangelical” stage of the temperance movement, in which women played such a key role, was followed by a “popular” stage characterized by male leadership (p. 33). The ladies of Virginia were supplanted by the Sons of Temperance, who excluded women from full membership in their societies. Nonetheless, the ideology of female civic duty, while making clear distinctions between women’s disinterested benevolence and men’s ambitious politicking, offered Virginia’s “strong-minded women” a legitimate way to step onto the public stage (p. 37).

Chapter Two examines the role that Virginia’s self-

proclaimed “Female Citizens” played in the state’s efforts at gradual emancipation and colonization of blacks (pp. 48-49). Rejecting southern women’s historians’ attempts to characterize white women in the Old South as either closet abolitionists or die-hard supporters of the South’s “peculiar institution” as “misguided,” Varon argues that Virginia women saw colonization as the answer to the problems that slavery caused for both blacks and whites (p. 42). Through their support of the American Colonization Society (founded in 1816) and, after Nat Turner’s revolt in 1831, by promoting female education in Liberia, women in antebellum Virginia actively participated in public debates about slavery and, in doing so, claimed a political role. As a group of petitioners from Augusta County stated: “Although it be unexampled, in our beloved State, that females should interfere in its political concerns ... yet we hold our right to do so to be unquestionable, and feel ourselves irresistibly impelled to the exercise of that right by the most potent considerations” (p. 50).

Varon’s third chapter examines the “transformation in women’s civic roles” that accompanied the rise of the second party system (p. 72). As women were drawn into the election of 1840 as participants in the Whig party’s rallies, speeches, and marches, a new notion of women’s civic duty emerged. According to Varon, “Whig womanhood embodied the notion that women could—and should—make vital contributions to party politics by serving as both partisans and mediators in the public sphere” (p. 72). The ideology of Whig womanhood held that women should use their presumed superior morality and selfless patriotism to regulate the political process. By the 1850s, Democrats also welcomed women’s participation in party functions. Taken together with Cynthia Kierner’s work, Varon’s research suggests that southern women had an active place in political life long before they achieved suffrage.[2]

Chapter Four focuses on women’s work as sectional mediators and partisans, primarily through an examination of “Southern domestic fiction” (p. 104). Combining elements of the southern plantation novel with the northern domestic novel, Virginia women’s writings assigned southern women responsibility for maintaining order and morality in the slaveholding household. Like Elizabeth Moss, Varon suggests that southern women writers had their greatest success as defenders of slavery.[3] When Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* assailed slavery as an immoral system, southern domestic novelists and their protagonists fought back. Mary Eastman’s *Aunt Phillis’s Cabin: Or, Southern Life*

as It Is (1852) and Martha Haines Butt’s *Antifanaticism: A Tale of the South* (1853) rebutted Stowe’s portrait of Eliza’s flight to freedom with depictions of contented and loyal slaves, cared for by attentive and responsible masters and mistresses. In fiction as in life, southern women staked out a place in political life. “In Southern women’s fiction, women spoke out about politics—not only did female authors craft political dialogue, ... but female characters themselves often held forth on political issues” (p. 105). But while Virginia women defended their region against outside criticism, they also attempted to mediate sectional conflict. The women who founded the Mount Vernon Association in 1854 framed their attempts to preserve the estate as a step toward “national unity” (p. 125).

The fifth and final chapter of *We Mean To Be Counted* details the process by which female Virginians changed from “lovers of peace and concord” to avid secessionists (p. 146). “As the political philosophy of Unionism lost popularity,” Varon writes, “so, too, did the idea that women should serve as sectional mediators. As Southern nationalism gained popularity, a new ideal of female civic duty began to take shape—that women were purer *Southern* patriots than men, and that they should lead the way not in the struggle to preserve the Union but in the battle to defend the South” (p. 138). While John Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry and the Election of 1860 helped to create anti-union sentiment among Virginia women, the three months of the secession convention in early 1861 were instrumental in creating a new ideal of “Confederate womanhood” (p. 137). This ideal lauded the self-sacrificing patriotism and fierce southern nationalism of women in the Southern Confederacy. However, Varon cautions, “Confederate womanhood was a poor reflection of the actual experiences of women. Secession did not eliminate, even temporarily, political divisions among Virginia women” (p.165). Despite the assertion of Alexandria resident Judith McGuire that “One common sentiment animated us all; no doubts, no fears were felt” (p. 167), the refusal of some Virginia women to support secession throughout 1860 and 1861 helps to explain why southern women ultimately refused to sacrifice everything on the altar of the Southern Confederacy, as Drew Gilpin Faust has so recently and provocatively argued.[4]

Elizabeth Varon succeeds admirably in supporting her claim that “white Southern women’s postbellum political roles and activities were extensions of their antebellum ones” (p. 171). She also has succeeded in presenting her readers with a new image of white southern women. Rather than seeing white southern women as

the white-gloved ladies or coquettish belles of plantation lore, or even as the devoted mothers or hardworking mistresses portrayed in more recent scholarly work, we now see them as political actors, if not “political amazons” (p. 89). Richmonder Sallie Brock Putnam’s 1861 comment, “Every woman was to some extent a politician” (p. 154), is borne out by Varon’s description of Virginia women, knitting in hand, crowding the ladies’ gallery at the secession convention (p. 155).

We Mean To Be Counted does not include all Virginia women. Indeed, the limits of Varon’s study neatly coincide with the limits of white women’s political activism in antebellum Virginia. Varon, for example, limits her study to well-to-do white women, leaving the study of black women to other scholars. Her subjects, likewise, largely limited their benevolent enterprises to white women. As Varon perceptively points out, the narrow scope of Virginia women’s definition of civic virtue helped to protect them from charges of abolitionism. “Since they excluded blacks,” she writes, “they posed no threat to the racial caste system” (p. 21).

The scope of white women’s political activities in antebellum Virginia was limited in other ways as well. In the second party system, for example, while women’s roles went far beyond serving as symbols, they stopped far short of selecting candidates. As Varon notes, “Women’s function in partisan life had clear limits: their role was not to choose Whig candidates but to affirm the choices of Whig men” (p. 84). White women’s public speaking, too, was limited by the need to avoid the taint of northern-style feminism. Although Whig womanhood granted women access to the podium in the 1840s, by the 1850s southern women had to speak through male proxies to avoid condemnation as “cackling geese” (p. 101), as one Virginia newspaper referred to delegates to the woman’s suffrage convention of 1852.

Varon’s study thus suggests not only the importance of the antebellum years in the creation of white women’s political culture, but also the ways in which the need to avoid being tarred with the brush of abolitionism and

feminism would continue to shape southern women’s activities even after the Civil War. Elizabeth Van Lew, a Reconstruction-era postmistress who referred to herself as an “active and earnest Republican so far as a woman can be” and who did not hesitate to “tell men what to say,” fought a losing battle to bring both blacks’ civil rights and women’s rights to her countrywomen’s attention (p. 174). Nonetheless, when a group of Richmond women founded the Virginia State Woman Suffrage Association in 1870, the membership list of the state’s first women’s rights group indicated the continued conservatism of southern women’s politics.

We Mean To Be Counted is an engaging, accessible, and provocative book that will reshape the ways that historians of southern women and antebellum politics think about womanhood and public life in America.

Notes

[1]. Suzanne D. Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1984) and Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[2]. Cynthia Kierner, “Genteel Balls and Republican Parades: Gender and Early Southern Civic Rituals, 1677-1826,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 104 (Spring 1996), 185-210.

[3]. Elizabeth Moss, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

[4]. Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

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