

H-Net Reviews

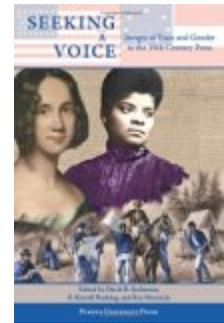
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing, Roy Morris Jr., eds. *Seeking a Voice: Images of Race and Gender in the 19th Century Press*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009. xiii + 347 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55753-505-4; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55753-508-5.

Reviewed by Kimberley Mangun (University of Utah)

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Forgotten Journalists and Overlooked Stories from the Nineteenth Century

In November 1993, thirteen journalism historians gathered in Chattanooga, Tennessee, for a small conference whose program featured a mix of presentations, opportunities to visit with attendees, and field trips to some of the area's Civil War sites. The meeting also included a two-hour conversation about the "feasibility of a full-scale conference on the Antebellum and Civil War Press and the First Amendment." [1] And the rest, as they say, is history.

The Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression has been held annually since then. The three-day conference offers an intimate venue for scholars and students to present papers dealing with a variety of topics, including the Civil War in fiction and history, images of race and gender in the press, press coverage of presidents, and sensationalism and crime in nineteenth-century newspapers. David B. Sachsman of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga is director of the symposium. He has worked closely with colleague S. Kittrell Rushing, also a professor at Chattanooga and a cofounder of the conference, to develop a series of edited collections featuring papers presented at the event. The books include: *The Civil War and the Press* (2000); *Memory and Myth: The Civil War in Fiction and Film from Uncle Tom's Cabin to Cold Mountain* (2007); *Words at War: The Civil War and American Journalism* (2008); and *Seeking a Voice*, the subject of this review.

This most recent volume presents twenty-nine papers

organized into four sections. Part 1, "Race Reporting," features six essays about press coverage of African Americans and Native Americans. Author Sarah Mitchell, for example, discusses news stories about Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who murdered her daughter rather than see her returned to a life in bondage. And William E. Huntzicker focuses on *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* for his entry, "Picturing American Indians: Newspaper Pictures and Native Americans in the 1860s and 1870s." A seventh essay in this section, "Birth of a Besieged Nation: Discourses of Victimhood in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," seems out of place for two reasons. First, the film was released in 1915, beyond the scope of *Seeking a Voice*, and second, the piece discusses the movie's role in the formation of "the notion of white victimhood," which does not mesh with this section's focus on "the various ways in which America's racial minorities were reported" (pp. 78, 1).

Part 2, "The Fires of Discontent," concentrates on some well-known individuals—Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass—and some lesser-known individuals—the orator William Hamilton and his sons, Thomas and Robert, who became "the most prominent black journalists of the Civil War era" (p. 99).

Part 3, "The Cult of True Womanhood," takes its title from Barbara Welter's influential 1966 article that identified the ways in which women's magazines, sermons, and other literature published in the antebellum years

promoted purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness. The seven entries in this section consider issues of identity and idealized womanhood. A study of *Godey's Magazine*, for example, discusses how advice columns and essays framed motherhood as "a sacred honor and a religious duty" that enabled women to influence society (p. 174). And a study of weekly newspapers published in West Virginia between 1865 and 1890 demonstrates that "the ideology of domesticity" was both promoted and praised (p. 216).

Finally, part 4, "Transcending the Boundaries," focuses in part on some of the ways that women challenged the status quo of the era. For instance, Sara Jane Clarke wrote political columns under a pen name, Grace Greenwood, for the *National Era* and *Saturday Evening Post*. Lois B. Adams also used a pseudonym, "L," when writing for the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune* about life in Washington DC during the Civil War. Although the editors describe this section as woman-centered, an entry by Mary Cronin focuses on how four men—Ezra Heywood, D. M. Bennett, Moses Harman, and E. B. Foote Sr.—found themselves the target of the Comstock Act, which banned the mailing of obscene materials, due to "their discussions of individual rights, religion, women's rights, and family planning" (p. 304).

The essays range in length from eight to sixteen pages, including notes—a brevity that may be beneficial for professors who teach communication history to undergraduate students. *Seeking a Voice* could be used as a stand-alone text, augmented by in-class lectures and discussions; it also could be assigned with one of the media history textbooks, such as *Voices of a Nation: A History of Mass Media in the United States* (5th ed., 2008) or *The Media in America: A History* (7th ed., 2008). However, the essays' length is also a drawback; the editors acknowledge that the contributions are shorter than they were when first presented. Readers may be frustrated by the lack of depth in many entries, and the condensing/editing process has caused some endnotes to be lost. More bothersome is the loss of focus that occurs in some entries. For example, the essay "Heretical or Conventional: Native Americans and African Americans in the Journalism of Jane Grey Swisshelm" is mainly about Swisshelm's views on Indians, while the entry "Fires of Discontent: Religious Contradictions in the Black Press, 1830-1860" focuses instead on pamphlets, religious tracts, letters, and sermons. An interesting piece about the "notorious Florence Maybrick" (p. 277) and coverage of the American

woman's murder trial in Liverpool in 1889 mostly utilizes *New York Times* articles, rather than the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer that the title (and entry) promises. And the essay about Eliza Frances Andrews, a Southerner who turned to writing to earn a living, is really about her interest in travel writing and botany rather than her reportage. Re-titling many of the entries might have been one way to solve the apparent shifts in focus caused by paring down conference-length papers.

Similarly, the title of the book may mislead some readers. Although a few entries deal with visual representations, such as "Racial and Ethnic Imagery in 19th Century Political Cartoons" and the quantitative piece "The Darlings Come Out to See the Volunteers: Depictions of Women in *Harper's Weekly* during the Civil War," most of the essays in *Seeking a Voice* are biographical sketches of people or publications, or examples of coverage of topics, issues, events, or people, such as the entry, "The First Lady and the Media: Newspaper Coverage of Dolley Madison." Perhaps "impression" is a better way to think about this collection, since many authors convey the idea of lasting effects, opinions, or mental images of people and/or things. Overall, the inclusion of photographs, cartoons, newspaper headlines, or other images would have added to the book (just one entry is illustrated). For example, author Aleen J. Ratzlaff writes an interesting essay, "Illustrated African American Journalism: Political Cartooning in the *Indianapolis Freeman*." The inclusion of some of those political cartoons would have enhanced her study of the country's first illustrated black newspaper.

The program for this year's Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression features a wide range of topics, including baseball, soldiers as reporters, sensational reporting, and contributions by some nineteenth century's female journalists. Although Sachsman, Rushing, and coeditor Roy Morris Jr. have ended their "relationship as an editing team with *Seeking a Voice* and have no further contract with Purdue University Press," Sachsman wrote in an e-mail to the author of this review that he believes the symposium "will continue to produce books of readings in the future."

Note

[1]. <http://www.utc.edu/Academic/WestChairOfExcellenceInCommunication/Symposium/programs/1993Program.php>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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