

# H-Net Reviews

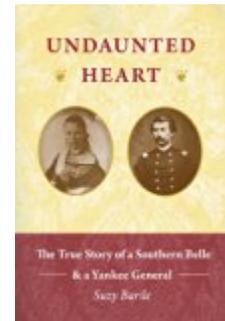
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Suzy Barile. *Undaunted Heart: The True Story of a Southern Belle and a Yankee General*. Hillsborough: Eno, 2009. 237 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9820771-1-5.

Reviewed by Laura J. Davis (University of Georgia)

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## Romance and Reconstruction

Suzy Barile's debut book centers on the infamous 1865 wedding between Ella Swain, the "spirited" daughter of the University of North Carolina's president, and Smith Dykins Atkins, the Union general who occupied Chapel Hill. Barile—a journalist by trade—is the great-great-granddaughter of the Atkinses, and she grew up hearing tales of the love affair that inspired bitterness among Chapel Hillians and forced the duo to escape to Illinois. When she found Ella Swain's long-lost letters in her mother's attic, Barile was moved to recast the Swain-Atkins affair as "a love that transcended the bitterness of war and scandal" and reveal the story's happy ending (p. xii).

Whether familiar with the Swain-Atkins scandal or not, readers will appreciate Barile's artful storytelling and novel-like prose. She chronicles their relationship from the ill-timed courtship to the deaths of Ella and Smith Atkins, noting their triumphs and heartaches along the way. More than half of the book is devoted to the married lives of Ella and the "Genl"—Ella's pet name for Atkins. From Ella's letters arises a picture of marital bliss in Freeport, Illinois; they had beautiful children, "a lovely home, financial security, and each other" (p. 101). The General was a devoted, generous, and sensitive husband who showered his wife with gifts of clothing, jewelry, and books, and comforted her in times of loss. The couple had six children, Swain Graham, David Swain, Eleanor Hope ("Dot"), Richard Swain, Smith Dyke ("Dyke"), and Susan Annie, with Dot, Dyke, and Susan surviving infancy and only the girls living to adulthood.

Despite a strenuous work schedule—he was simultaneously a postmaster, a lawyer, a civil leader, and a newspaper owner—Atkins was apparently a loving and doting father who often played with his children and rocked them to sleep. Meanwhile, Ella cast herself as "a very industrious housekeeper" who loved to entertain and "prove herself as a good wife, homemaker, and mother" (pp. 91, 97). Because the couple eventually established a schedule in which Ella and the children wintered in North Carolina and summered in Illinois, the two were hundreds of miles apart when Ella unexpectedly passed in June of 1881 at age thirty-eight.

Suddenly a widower and father of three, General Atkins had "lost his love—the feisty young woman who had taunted him about the clumsiness of his first acrostic" (p. 138). He turned to his mother-in-law, the woman who refused to share a meal with him, for help until her own death two years later. Despite allegations to the contrary, the General never remarried, raising Dot and Susan himself. In an ironic twist of fate, Illinois-born Dot fell in love with Needham Tyndale Cobb of Raleigh, North Carolina, mirroring the actions of her own parents. Susan did not fare as well in love, having two failed marriages and living out her life in Freeport as a single mother of five. In 1913, after ten days of illness, the General's "long, full life ended at the Prospect Terrace home he once had shared with Ella" (p. 164). Barile concludes her narrative by stating that "Nearly half a century after courageously promising to love one another until death did them part, Ella and her Genl were finally home," despite

being buried apart—Ella in Raleigh and Atkins in Freeport (p. 167).

Without question, Barile's major contribution to the field is her delineation of the Atkinses' married life and the revelation of the Ella Swain letters. To flesh out her story, Barile relies heavily on contemporary newspapers and the writings of famed local diarist and historian Cornelia Phillips Spencer. She also cites local histories and university chronicles with frequency, imparting a well-rounded account of nineteenth-century Chapel Hill. Interspersed throughout are family photographs and biographical sketches of the Swain and Atkins families. While occasionally disruptive to the narrative flow—as are her innumerable section breaks—they do not mar Barile's dynamic and engaging story. This is certainly a well-crafted local history worthy of the awards and acclaim it has earned to date—the tome even received a glowing endorsement from the chancellor of UNC-Chapel Hill.

Academic audiences seeking more than a charming anecdote will be disappointed though. In fairness, it was never Barile's intention to pen an academic work, but the missed opportunities are legion. The book lacks theoretical rigor or analysis, and there are very few contextual or critical examinations of the intersection of the Swain-Atkins affair with Reconstruction history, race relations, or the historical literature. Indeed, Reconstruction only enters into Barile's narrative if it directly impacts her characters. Her sole mention of Reconstruction-era politics is to note that they "prevented Atkins from immediately starting his job as postmaster ... [because] he was a less-than-ardent supporter of Lincoln's successor" (p. 73). Her references to emancipation and freedmen are equally scarce. While she does make a passing reference to the Black Codes and their "dramatic" restrictions, she fails to analyze the impact emancipation had on Chapel Hillians or the Swain family; instead she notes euphemistically that both had numerous "*colored friends*" and black servants (p. 13). Nor does Barile juxtapose this actual North-South alliance with the metaphorical ones well documented in the romance of reunion literature. As Nina Silber, Amy Murrell Taylor, and others have chronicled, the marriage metaphor of the late nineteenth century reinforced a sectional reconciliation that swept African Americans under the rug. Silber posited that "the union of hearts became a wedding of the North and the South, a marriage which, described by northerners, almost always paired the feminine South with the masculine North"—an apt description of the Swain-Atkins union as well.[1] Barile does passingly comment that "the Swain/Atkins wedding was seen as a joining of

North and South (at least by those in Freeport)," but she does not seize the opportunity to make a deeper analysis (p. 159).

Most problematically, Barile does little to lay bare the racial dimensions of the locals' enraged reaction to the marriage. She notes that Chapel Hillians had a deep hatred for the North and blamed Atkins for "the preponderance of Sherman's devastation" and President Swain for turning traitor (p. 46). But nowhere in Barile's somewhat whitewashed account does she reflect on the locals' anger over the loss of their enslaved property or their fears of black emancipation and citizenship. One of her few references to freedmen was in relation to the couple's wedding cake—a gift from former slaves to their "liberator," General Atkins. Barile paints the scene as "emblematic of the rapidly changing world in which they were living, the guests ate the cake baked by these newly freed slaves, as the loud protest continued from the Old South," without noting that the Old South's protest had always been and would continue to be about the status of blacks in America (p. 65). Furthermore, Barile's portrait of university students tolling the campus bells to shout down the ceremony comes across as a protest of one union, not a protest against *the* Union and its successful prosecution of a war for emancipation. Even her vast inclusion of Spencer quotations is a bit selective. While generally supportive of the marriage, Spencer painted a far gloomier, and more racially tinged, picture of what she foresaw for the South. "A profound depression has seized upon me," she noted in 1865. "I see before us only humiliation, privation & a life of continued toil. This Southern land is ruined for this & the coming generation.... The whole frame-work of our social system is dissolved. The negroes are free, leaving their homes with very few exception & those exceptions are only for a time. No one has any money.... [The] South lies prostrate, cowed, submissive." [2] Had Barile coupled *that* quotation with Ella Swain's surrender to Atkins, the reader would have had a better sense of the emotional bitterness that met the marriage.

In her actual intent of resurrecting the Swain-Atkins affair from North Carolina mythology, Barile triumphs. Her biographical sketch of an "undaunted love" is captivating and comes to the apt conclusion that "their love story had been one of the most controversial in mid-nineteenth century North Carolina. Yet they never doubted their love for one another" (p. 138). One can only hope that Barile will share the Ella Swain letters with subsequent generations by bequeathing them to the Southern Historical Collection. Perhaps then, Ella and

her General will move beyond local lore into the greater narrative of race, reunion, and Reconstruction.

#### Notes

[1]. Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of

North Carolina Press, 1993), 65. Please also see Amy Murrell Taylor, *The Divided Family in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[2]. Cornelia Phillips Spencer, "May 7, 1865," Cornelia Phillips Spencer Papers #683, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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