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Sharon M. Harris, Robin L. Cadwallader, eds. *Rebecca Harding Davis's Stories of the Civil War Era: Selected Writings from the Borderlands.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. xxxviii + 319 pp. $69.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-8203-3231-4; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3435-6.

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In *Rebecca Harding Davis's Stories of the Civil War Era*, editors Sharon M. Harris and Robin L. Cadwallader have collected a body of short stories that transcend the popular offerings often associated with Civil War-era fiction. The strength of the collection rests in Davis's powers of observation developed as a journalist, her astute social commentary, and her personal experiences gained from her upbringing in western Pennsylvania and the area of Virginia that would eventually become West Virginia. The concept of "borderlands"–an area where loyalties are divided both geographically and emotionally–is used to define the ambiguity that Davis addresses in her most effective stories. In their introduction, Harris and Cadwallader refer to one of these stories, "David Gaunt," to illustrate how the objective narrator "delves into the minds and struggles of the men and women experiencing the destruction on both sides of the conflict–readers come to understand that truth in human form is never absolute" (p. xxii).

More farsighted than many writers of her time, Davis recognized the strictures that bound the women of her era and the plight of workers in an increasingly industrialized world, as well as the uncertainties that were often overlooked in the fictionalization of life during and after the Civil War. In contrast to the sectional, über-patriotic jingoism often found in the literature of the war and Reconstruction, Davis's characters are developed with intimate personal details of identity and place, including all the accompanying ambiguities. Davis makes clear that for most people, the war was not a conflict of battles bloody and grand or a contest between larger-than-life personalities, but the sacrifice of the average citizen and the struggle of the lowly soldiers and little-known officers who took part in remote skirmishes and minor engagements. The isolated borderlands of Davis's stories present the gray area of the philosophical divide between Virginia and its western region, as well as a literal wedge between neighbors, families, farms, and communities. Harris and Cadwallader point out that this sectionalism, based on a feeling of disenfranchisement, was highly developed in the areas of Virginia and Pennsylvania about which Davis writes.

The most successful of Davis's stories present a reality that hardly meshes with the romanticized visions of the Lost Cause or the salvation of the Union. "John Lamar" presents the complex plight of three men: Lamar, his slave Ben, and Dorr, a Northerner with whom Lamar became as close as a brother at Yale University. A Georgia plantation owner, Lamar travels to what would become West Virginia while on an official duty for the Confederate army. He visits the plantation of his grandfather, but upon arrival discovers that his grandfather has been murdered and the plantation taken over as a Union base of operations. It is Dorr's men who take Lamar prisoner; Dorr has lived at the plantation since his marriage to Lamar's cousin Ruth. Dorr, the Yankee officer, regularly visits Lamar, the slave-owner, to talk political ideology and old times.

Through the two men's congenial discussions as captor and prisoner, Davis presents all the grandiose arguments about the philosophic rightness of both sides of the war. In the context within which Davis places the debate, the tone of high morality descends into the ludicrous when it becomes clear that the essence of war is suffering on an individual basis. Ben, the conscience of the story and the character whom the war affects most directly in an ethical sense, absorbs the details of the debate. Stimulated by the urging of a fanatical abolitionist guard, Ben sees the ridiculousness of both sides and concludes that he would be better off with neither the condescension of abolitionists nor the benevolence of a kind master. As Harris and Cadwallader point out, the guard represents the "conscience of every American who sees only one side of the issue," while Lamar and Dorr are victims of circumstance caught in the limbo of the border-

lands (p. xxii). A story such as "John Lamar," set in the gray area of non-Confederate Virginia, makes the themes Davis presents all the more valid. This is not the floor of the Senate, nor the pulpit of the South, nor big-city newspaper propaganda. This is a region where nothing is quite clear–what to believe, or even in which country a person or town resides.

A masterpiece of irony, "General William Wirt Colby" (1877) takes place prior to the Civil War and ends as the conflict commences. Davis is hardly subtle in her message as she challenges the glorification of war and the perceptions of heroism, duty, loyalty, and even intellectual pretension, which she portrays as a convenient excuse to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions or contributing to the betterment of society. In the story, as described by the unreliable narrator, the eponymous character is thought of by the local citizenry as "an exceptional character; they have come (sure test of a hero) to be proud of him, in that he is of a different type than themselves" (p. 305). The reader soon discovers that he truly is exceptional, but not for his heroic and self-sacrificing deeds.

In the story, William Colby leaves his isolated hometown community amidst great hurrah to filibuster in Nicaragua and campaign with the Italian exile Giuseppe Garibaldi. Colby returns a hero only to disappear again and return as a brigadier general as the Civil War looms. The reality is that in his search for adventure, Colby abandons his father (who is too busy thinking deep thoughts to lower himself to earn a living), family, and fiancée to be supported by his brother James, who is "undeniably common-place" and works as a clerk in a shoe store (p. 307). When William returns to marry, he is only one step ahead of debt-collectors–he departs before he can be arrested. In his final appearance William abandons his wife and three children to the care of James. The narrator, always the apologist, explains, "[General Colby] was censured by many for leaving his family in Tarrytown without any adequate support. But the great mission which God had given him, in my opinion, exonerated him from petty duties" (p. 317). The true hero, of course, is James, who through his selflessness, forsook love and potential prosperity, and, in the end, sacrificed his life in order to fulfill his duty.

Other stories in the collection offer similar astute perspectives within the thematic arc of the borderlands, and Davis renders each narrative with a skillful hand. She is a talented writer whose use of irony and ambiguity provides fresh insights into both the personal and social divisions of the Civil War era. As the editors point out, "she recognizes that people who live in border towns are subject to greater conflict in time of war" (p. xxxii). As Davis says in her autobiographical "Bits of Gossip" (1904), from a borderland vantage, one is able to "see the great question from both sides. It [is] a most unpleasant position.... The man who sees both sides of the shield may be right, but he is most uncomfortable" (quoted in Harris and Cadwallader, p. xxxii).

While it is difficult to critique historical literature by a writer who established herself as a prominent voice in the defense of the women, workers, and invisible victims of her time, it must be noted that, like much of the literature of the era, Davis's work sometimes suffers from her use of phonetic dialect. Her use of dialect for her slave characters is especially distracting, but this appraisal can also be applied to her treatment of rural white characters and suggests a certain condescension and stereotyping. Some of the dialect is borderline indecipherable and detracts from the narrative trajectory and momentum: " 'O Lord!' cried the negro, 'ef Mist' Dode was hyur! Him's goin' an' him's las' breff is given ter de beast! Mars' Joe,' calling in his ear, 'fur God's sake say um prayer!"' (p. 67). In a similar vein, Davis's intrusive narrative voice ("Do you not like this Lizzie Gurney?" [p. 154]), though a reflection of the didactic style of the times, holds Davis back from reaching a level of stylistic greatness on a par with her notability as a social critic. Of course, criticism of Davis's writing style is subjective at best.

In the context of the collection, the only weakness worthy of note is that Harris and Cadwallader have included several stories that are inconsistent with the theme of the anthology. Despite the editors' explanations, the thread that ties these stories to the borderlands is too thin. The most notable orphans of the stories, "Out to Sea," a tale of the Jersey shore, and "The Harmonists," a story that addresses Utopian settlements that sprang up in the nineteenth century, distract from the trajectory of the collection. The fact that the stories were written during the Civil War era makes them only peripherally relevant. This is not to say that these several stories are without merit, particularly "In the Market," which addresses the constraints on employment and self-support that society placed on women in the late nineteenth century. The editors place the story in the "borderlands of social reconstruction," yet this story and the others mentioned are conspicuous in their divergence from the cohesiveness of the bulk of the anthology (p. xxix). While female self-determination is a favorite topic of Davis's and well represented in "In the Market," the only connection to the collection relates to the postwar absence of potential husbands (p. xvi).

Overall, any criticism of *Rebecca Harding Davis's Stories of the Civil War Era* is minor compared to the value of the anthology for a range of disciplines, including literary studies, Civil War history, Southwestern border studies, cultural anthropology, women's studies, and gender studies. Besides its thematic importance, the collection also clearly illustrates Davis's literary talents, which stand out in comparison to many other writers of her generation. Had she not been constrained by the literary conventions of the time, Davis might have become as noted for her writing skills as for her stance on social concerns.

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