

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anna E. Dickinson. *A Tour of Reconstruction: Travel Letters of 1875*. Edited by J. Matthew Gallman. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 188 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3424-6; ISBN 978-0-8131-3425-3.

Reviewed by Giselle Roberts (La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia)

Published on H-SAWH (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Lisa A. Francavilla

Twilight softened the “half kept” sidewalks as thirty-two-year-old Anna Elizabeth Dickinson rode into Raleigh, North Carolina, in April 1875. The northern-born lyceum speaker and her agent, O. W. Bernard, had been on the road for a week, delving deeper into the “dreariness, dirt, poverty, brutishness, & desolation” of the South—so Raleigh’s pretty disposition was a welcome sight indeed (pp. 63, 76). “Very fine even good houses,” Anna remarked joyously, “the greatest abundance of flowers everywhere ... oaks of all sorts, & all beautiful everywhere” (p. 76). Her lodgings at the Talboro boarding house were the best they had encountered thus far. Proprietors Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell were “obliging & efficient,” and the mistress of the house was “as sweet as honey” (p. 76). “Had I judged from their manner to me, I would have gone away saying ‘how well disposed & really loyal these people are,’” Anna later disclosed in a letter to her mother. “But one day, after I had been talking with them in the hall, I stopped in the parlor, at the top of the stairs, for a few moments, & as I came out,—I heard Mrs. Blackwell say—‘I’d like to see every wretch of a Yankee burned at the stake’—‘I’d like to burn them’—responding one of the others.” “And the whole thing, false smiles,—almost fawning on a merely transient traveler, seeming good will,—& deadly hate is a fair sample of the entire state of things here,” she wrote (pp. 76-77). Dickinson added that Raleigh’s pleasing veneer simply masked what she had observed in other parts of the South: sectional hatred, poor schools, a broken and deserted governor’s mansion, and a penitentiary filled with African American men. “They are cunning enough to be as sweet as honey to the ‘passer by’—if the passer by has money or influence, but wo’ betide the passer by, if he or she pitch tent & remain,” she concluded (p. 82).

North Carolina was part of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson’s 1875 lecture tour of the South, where she also spoke to audiences in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. She wrote four lengthy letters home to her mother which form the basis of this volume. Dickinson

was a public speaker of note. Her oratorical star had shone brightest during and immediately after the Civil War when she had earned up to \$200 a night for lectures on abolitionism, sectionalism, and women’s rights.[1] In the scrimping modesty of postwar America, Dickinson worked feverishly to maintain her public profile on the lyceum circuit. Venturing South created the sensation she had hoped for, and Dickinson penned a finely grained portrait of the region for her mother, perhaps with a view to later publication. Her letters provide a radical abolitionist perspective on the legacy of war and a critique on the South’s civic, political, and racial progress during the dying days of Reconstruction. Dickinson traversed southern cities and towns, visited Confederate memorials, Union cemeteries, schools, churches, penitentiaries, state houses, and boarding houses, and commented on the appearance, occupations, social relations, and political participation of African Americans and white southerners.

The significance of Dickinson’s account lies in her nuanced portrait of the southern landscape and its people. The correspondence is thematic, so that each letter folds into the other in a series of environmental, architectural, and sociological observations. Raleigh’s spring flowers were the bright spot in Dickinson’s otherwise disconcerting narrative on the “open & dreary” southern countryside, which she described as an expanse of uncultivated fields punctuated by “dusty & frowsy” towns and “dustier & frowsier” people (p. 33). In Dickinson’s estimation the landscape bore the mark both of northern wartime mastery and southern postwar idleness. White southerners were poor and conceited: Virginians, she scoffed, had the “manners of proud backwoodsmen.” “The ‘first families,’ go about in ill fitting boots, & battered hats, & limp linens,” she told her mother, and still “*really & honestly* believe there is no such place & there are no such people under the sun as this state of Virginia” (pp. 37-38). In North Carolina she traveled through the pine-dotted countryside, meeting “the most utterly helpless,

ignorant, 'lousy' degraded" people "it was ever my bad fate to behold" (p. 64). In Raleigh, the unreconstructed women wrapped their hatred of northerners in affectation. In other towns the inhabitants openly expressed the sentiment that "the 'Invaders' were responsible for the whole thing, had begun it, carried it on wantonly, & were generally wretches worthy of death" (p. 105). Dickinson reacted sharply to this undercurrent of sectional hostility. After visiting a Confederate prison camp outside Salisbury—where over twelve thousand Union soldiers had been buried in pits, "flung like cord wood, twelve & fourteen deep, till it would hold no more"—Dickinson waged silent retribution of her own. "I could not go into the parlor where these people were, nor onto their streets," she wrote (pp. 88, 91). Dickinson wrote about hallowed Union ground and the northern martyrs, setting lost heroes against the Confederate soldiers and citizens that "epitomize so much of the satanic cruelty & the devilish degradation of human nature" (p. 92). Confederate graves, monuments, and southern cries of injustice earned only Dickinson's derision: "I hated them with such a loathing as to make me *crawl* at only having to breathe the same air with them" (p. 91).

Anna Dickinson's correspondence also provides an intriguing post-emancipation portrait of African American land ownership, employment, education, and community ties. In Virginia, Dickinson noted that the debt-ridden state had established "good schools for those who are to vote"—one of which was located in former Confederate president Jefferson Davis's wartime headquarters in Richmond (pp. 45, 154n21). In rural South Carolina she described the prevalence of small farms and sharecropping, where African Americans scratched out a poor existence with "starved looking mules" and "shovel' ploughs" (p. 96). In Charleston, for example, Dickinson observed elegantly dressed freedpeople who carried themselves with "dignity & air of command," who were active in community and civic life (p. 99). Unlike Virginia, where African American schools were run by white southern women, white South Carolinians opted for private tuition and turned their public education sys-

tem "over to the negroes." "This present growth of South Carolinians," Dickinson concluded, "is like to present a body of at least reasonably well informed colored people & of absolutely ignorant whites" (p. 98). In Georgia, the preservation of large estates made it "very difficult for a colored man, or a poor man of any kind to get hold of any land in Ga." Rather, freedpeople often found employment among the "retinue of servants" needed to manage large estates (p. 112). Bound by nineteenth-century rhetoric and ideology about race, Dickinson nevertheless used her own "vision of how Reconstruction should unfold" to frame her critique on the regionally specific struggles and status of freedpeople in the post war South (p. 25).

J. Matthew Gallman is to be congratulated for bringing Anna Elizabeth Dickinson's detailed correspondence to a wider audience. The letters are soundly edited and the map and itinerary are useful. For those who have not read Gallman's earlier study on Dickinson, entitled *America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (2006), however, the biographical content in this book is brief. The complex themes addressed by Dickinson speak to her understanding of herself as a northern woman as well as of the postwar world of which she was a part. Gallman briefly situates Dickinson within her landscape, but there is no conclusion to tie the threads of her correspondence to a larger biographical or national story. Further, the purpose of her trip—her lectures—receives little contextualization. Gallman presents a two-page image of articles and editorials gleaned from southern newspapers, but the commentary ends there. How did the southern press report on Dickinson's tour? What did Dickinson talk about, and have these lectures been preserved? This public dimension to her personal reflections would have been interesting indeed. Nevertheless, Dickinson's letters stand well on their own as an unreconstructed northerner's perspective on an equally unreconstructed postwar South.

Note

[1]. J. Matthew Gallman, *America's Joan of Arc: The Life of Anna Elizabeth Dickinson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 67.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Giselle Roberts. Review of Dickinson, Anna E., *A Tour of Reconstruction: Travel Letters of 1875*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38676>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.