

# H-Net Reviews

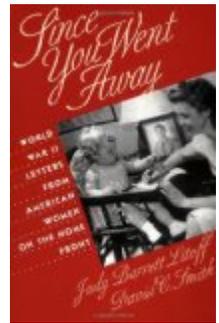
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Judy Barrett Litoff, David C. Smith, eds. *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. xii + 293 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-0714-3.

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## The Women Who Kept the Home Fires Burning

This book is a collection of personal letters that illuminates the concerns and activities of American women on the home front during the Second World War. Litoff and Smith spent over three years tracking down letters that were presumed lost or destroyed because of military orders that soldiers not keep personal items in their possession while in battle. In spite of the obstacles, they collected about 25,000 carefully preserved letters written mostly by white women (there is variation in ethnicity, region, and class) to their husbands and boyfriends who were off at war. Litoff and Smith were interested in finding and publishing these letters because they “contain valuable information and insights which will benefit historians as they continue in their efforts to validate the ‘female experience’ and to incorporate the meaning of this ‘experience’ into their accounts of the past” (p. viii). This was a good choice to that end.

The letters are organized thematically to reflect the issues that most concerned American women during the war: “Don’t You Know There’s a War On?,” “Courtship by Mail,” “War Brides,” “War Wives,” “I Took a War Job,” “For the Duration,” “The Price of Victory,” and “Why We Fought.” A pictorial essay on V-mail and letter writing is also included; it underscores the importance of mail call and news from home for the soldiers. Litoff and Smith were selective in the letters they included. Except for the first and last chapters, which contain letters from many different women, the chapters follow several series of letters from a few different women. This allows readers to

trace themes and relationships in detail. The editors also provide brief biographical information on the letter writers and recipients.

One of the most compelling series of letters presented in *Since You Went Away* is in the chapter on courtship. Letters written by Anne Gudis of Newark, New Jersey, to Samuel Kramer, a soldier originally from Ithaca, New York, show that long-distance romance was not only difficult but sometimes nasty and contentious as well. Their stormy courtship may not have been unusual, but an unexpected incident made it very public. After a series of unpleasant exchanges, Gudis sent Kramer a “Dear John” letter in September 1943 which succinctly said: “Mr. Kramer: Go To Hell! With love, Anne Gudis” (p. 56). Kramer sent this letter to *Yank*, a magazine for enlisted men, and it was published. The letter caused a public uproar in New Jersey and consternation within the military. Gudis had not behaved in a proper womanly fashion to a soldier stationed overseas: she willfully damaged his morale and did so using an unladylike word. In the end, though, the two married after the war and were still happily married when this book was published.

The most sobering chapter is “The Price of Victory.” Here we see the anguish of mothers, wives, and sweethearts who have lost their loved ones. Patriotism and war aims are of little consolation. Letters like this mother’s to General MacArthur upon receiving news of her son’s death make clear the brutal realities of war: “Please Gen-

eral he was a good boy, wasn't he? Did he die a hard death General? Oh! Please won't you drop me a line and tell me if he suffered long or not. My mind is so uneasy" (p. 231).

Litoff and Smith have done a great service to scholars of women's studies, women's history, and war. These letters represent a solid selection of primary source documents, earning this book a spot next to the now-standard monographs on American women and World War II, including Karen Anderson's *Wartime Women* and Susan Hartmann's *The Homefront and Beyond*. The book will provide useful source material for undergraduates writing research papers and will certainly spark ideas for additional historical study. Academics and non-academics will enjoy the sheer readability of the book.

I do have a couple of quibbles, though. The first is

minor. To me, the question "Don't you know there's a war on?" signifies a response to people asking for gasoline, silk stockings, and sirloin steaks, not as Litoff and Smith use it here to describe women's reactions to the outbreak of war. By the chapter title alone I expected totally different letters. The second is more crucial. The letters deserve lengthier contextual chapter introductions. I realize that the editors did not intend this as a historical monograph, but readers would be more firmly grounded in the time period if they knew more home front and military history. The Gudis-Kramer correspondence, for example, takes on greater significance if the readers understand what constituted "ladylike" behavior and the efforts that the government and military took to keep morale up.

These concerns aside, this book is necessary reading for anyone interested in women and war.

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