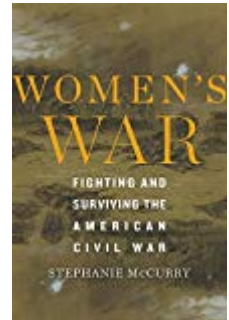


Stephanie McCurry. *Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2019. xii + 297 pages \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-98797-5.



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Commissioned by Lisa A. Francavilla (The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series and Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters)

Stephanie McCurry's new book is an unapologetically personal look at women in war, one that McCurry has been thinking about for a long time and that she traces back to her youth growing up in Northern Ireland under British occupation. Some of the terrain covered in the book extends or completes work that McCurry started elsewhere. Other parts of the work are wholly new, such as the chapter on Georgia diarist Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas. Still, one gets the sense this is not the last that McCurry has to say on any of the subjects covered in this book, and that is good news.

Though the book's title does not say as much, *Women's War* is about Southern women who were subjected to the US Army's gendered laws of war and who navigated its gendered path to emancipation, and who made their way forward in a postwar South in which all the rules of social hierarchy had been remade by the Union victory. The book reads as a series of lectures that are con-

nected by one thread: the patriarchal family served (and continues to serve) as an elemental form of governance that survived the Civil War, and became central to Union emancipation policy. Patriarchy crushed Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas—the Georgian plantation mistress whose writings are at the center of McCurry's third chapter—but it also served as a useful cipher through which she channeled her white supremacy.

The thread is admittedly a little thinner in the Thomas chapter, but McCurry's untangling of the twisted bonds of blood and love and hate that held that family together despite the patriarch's death is fascinating. So is McCurry's taking to task the historians who "scrubbed clean" Thomas's diary of references to her husband's and brother's participation in the Klan (p. 173). The published, cleaned-up version of Thomas's diary, *The Secret Eye* (1990), has fed the continued misreading of her as, at heart, an abolitionist and, sympathetic to the plight of women, as a feminist. Admittedly, feminists such as Susan B. Anthony embraced

Thomas for her suffrage activism. This was not difficult because of the endemic racism of suffragists like Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But Thomas's racism came from a deep, intimate place, and so did her obsession with black women's bodies. *Their* bodies betrayed white racial purity and because of that, and the poverty that nipped at her door, Thomas saw mixed-race women—some of whom were her own half-siblings—as a continued threat to the status of her children. So she supported and sustained white supremacist violence. Yet this story has yet to dislodge the one that portrays her as a hero to her own family and as a feminist icon, a narrative that was established by Mary Elizabeth Massey, whose 1972 Southern Historical Association Presidential Address about Thomas was titled, "The Making of a Feminist." Maybe McCurry's *Women's War* will help do that work.

The chapter on the "black soldier's wife" revisits the soldiers' wives of McCurry's 2009 *Confederate Reckoning*. In that book, McCurry showed how poor Southern white women pressed Southern governors to respond to their needs. Soldiers' wives were an unconsulted and unexpected constituency, and their demands became consequential as they helped to bring down the nascent Confederacy. In *Women's War*, the "black soldier's wife" emerges as a creation of the US government. Because, as a legal matter, enslaved people could not marry, the "black soldier's wife" was a way for the army and for Congress to contain the revolutionary potential unleashed in emancipation, a shoring up of other inequalities that might have been inadvertently shaken loose when the slaves went free. By freeing enslaved women into marriage, the United States preserved and extended patriarchy. And in focusing so much on the United States Colored Troops, the author claims, historians have missed how enslaved women made the transition to freedom "as laborers on Union-held plantations, or unwelcome dependents in contraband camps" (p. 103). Here McCurry joins other historians who have made or are making that

point, including Chandra Manning, Amy Murrell Taylor, and Thavolia Glymph.

In a way, the chapter on legal and political theorist Francis Lieber extends McCurry's 2009 discussion of the Confederate war on Unionist women in the South to examine the US Army's war on enemy women. This war took place both on the ground in the turn to hard war, and in the laws of war, in what became known as Lieber's Code. McCurry challenges John Fabian Witt's claim that Lieber's Code was principally driven by the need for a new set of rules that took account of emancipation. Instead, the code emerged from the need for new rules that reflected the war the US Army was waging against enemy women in Kentucky, Missouri, and Union-occupied Tennessee. McCurry portrays Lieber, like her a survivor of civil war, as reluctant to write a new set of laws of war that would strip women of the protections granted to them as presumptive noncombatants, but who was pushed to do so by Union general-in-chief Henry Halleck, who was busily arresting and imprisoning women for "war treason," a new category of war crime invented for them (p. 44). Lieber went along and wrote the code that wrecked gender conventions, but then regretted it, denied it, and tried to will women back to the patriarchal family, where he thought they belonged and could be best protected. It did not work, and the laws of war that Francis Lieber wrote helped to escalate violence, drawing in more women, children, and other "noncombatants" rather than constrain it in the wars that followed.

Stephanie McCurry's *Women's War*, in the end, makes a compelling case that women have never been outside of war. Yet, like Lieber and other Civil War-era warmakers, after each generation's war, survivors seek to cover up that truth, thereby making it easier to justify the next war. Reading books like Stephanie McCurry's latest should make us think carefully about the wars we

are fighting today and the stories we will tell
about them when they are over.

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