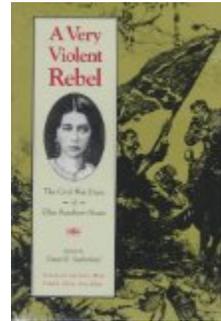


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel E. Sutherland, ed. *A Very Violent Rebel: The Civil War Diary of Ellen Renshaw House*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996. xxvi + 285 pp. \$34.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-944-9.

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The Real

The Real "Secesh Female"

In recent years, historians (including this reviewer) have examined the complex reactions of Confederate women to the Civil War with an emphasis on ambivalence, class conflict, and new gender roles. There has also been an emphasis on disaffection from the Confederacy and sometimes from men in general. Much of this scholarship has attempted to revise and even displace the stock contemporary and historical images of Confederate women as fervent and unwavering patriots willing to make any sacrifice for their beloved cause. Perhaps the interpretative pendulum has swung a bit far, and the publication of Ellen Renshaw House's diary should remind us that the traditional picture of fire-breathing and unreconstructed "secesh females" had some basis in fact.

Born in Savannah in 1843, young Ellen Renshaw House moved with her family to Knoxville, Tennessee, shortly before the war. Two of her brothers joined the Confederate army, but the family lived in a part of the state deeply divided between Unionists and rebel sympathizers. The House family owned a few slaves, but researchers looking for new evidence on the disintegration of slavery during the war will not find much information here, because Ellen House seldom mentioned "servants" or slavery.

There are a few diary entries beginning in January 1863, but she started recording her experiences regularly in September. This first and longest section covers the family's experience in Knoxville under Federal occupa-

tion. From the opening pages of her journal, House assumed the role of the prototypical rebel. Speaking of the Yankee soldiers, she noted simply: "How I hate them" (p. 4). Although she sometimes commented on the weather, domestic chores, and her struggles with learning to play the piano, the war soon overwhelmed all other topics. There are almost daily descriptions of Federal troops, civilians' arrests, and suffering Confederate prisoners. The very repetitiveness of the entries helps the reader understand the grinding nature of military occupation. House regularly complained about foul-mouthed soldiers entering her home, asking for food, and trying to engage her family in conversation. Military bands and gunfire occasionally interrupted her sleep.

As with many Confederate women, House used her diary to vent her spleen. She worried constantly about her beloved brother Johnny after he was captured on Missionary Ridge in November and sent to Johnson's Island in Lake Erie, and this only exacerbated her loathing for the Yankees. On one particularly hot and dry day, clouds of dust choked her throat, and she blamed the Federal troops for the discomfort. The stench of the streets and sidewalks made her wish that General James Longstreet would quickly arrive to liberate Knoxville. As several Yankees were brought in wounded from a small skirmish, they received her "best wishes to die" (p. 10). When some Federals attended her church, House haughtily remarked that none appeared to be gentlemen. She sometimes went out of her way to provoke a verbal confrontation with any soldier within earshot; she told one in-

ept Yankee captain that her Confederate friends would likely make good use of the guns they had recently captured from him. But she was also slyly diplomatic. Hoping to exchange messages with some Confederate prisoners, she talked pleasantly with a Yankee guard, all the while wanting to “knock him down and take his boots and gloves” (p. 30). On another occasion, she admitted she “could have seen every Yankee here murdered and not shuddered” (p. 43). House longed to have a cavalry carbine to shoot the invaders, but she wondered whether her intense hatred was quite lady-like.

Although House always tried to be optimistic, the failure of Longstreet’s ill-fated campaign to retake Knoxville left her so disheartened that she had difficulty breathing. By the beginning of 1864, her diary took on a tone of weary despair, as the Federals under Ambrose E. Burnside tightened their grip on the city. House along with her sisters and friends sent food and blankets to Confederate prisoners in town and brazenly waved their handkerchiefs as their butternut heroes were marched through the streets. When local citizens took the oath of allegiance to the United States because they desperately needed to carry on their businesses, House strongly criticized their lack of patriotism, but soon her own father followed suit. Even some local women, who had nowhere to flee in the rapidly shrinking Confederacy, succumbed to necessity and signed the accursed paper. House’s anger and frustration mounted. Upon hearing that some Yankee cavalry had been “ducked” after a pontoon bridge broke loose, she tartly remarked, “Pity they had not been drowned” (p. 91). And then her beloved dog Leo was shot by a bluecoat, and she watched him die.

House matter-of-factly recorded her activities and reactions to wartime rumors and events, but the travail of military occupation subtly changed her personality. She occasionally grew introspective and admitted to becoming “perfectly reckless” in words and actions. The diary contains oblique references to sending letters out of Knoxville to Confederate friends and offers an occasional hint of espionage. By April 1864 she was banished from the city for reasons that are not exactly clear.

After leaving Knoxville, she began writing in a pocket diary, and the entries became much briefer. She told little of herself but still reacted to war news. After learning of the notorious Fort Pillow massacre, she praised Nathan Bedford Forrest, who “put most of the garrison out of harm’s way, killed every officer there. Good for him. I think he did exactly right.” Refugeeing in Abingdon, Virginia, House recorded many groundless rumors

about dramatic Confederate victories and foreign intervention.

There was a three-month gap in her diary at the end of 1864 when she moved to Eatonton, Georgia, but she resumed writing at the beginning of the new year. She soon discovered that many once loyal Confederates could not match her own steadfastness. One acquaintance, who had “lost a lover and a brother” in the fighting and had three more brothers in the army, married a “fat little Dutchman” who bragged of coming to America to “kill Rebels” (p. 145). House lamented her own selfishness though she spent most of her time playing cards or arranging dances. At one soiree with “seven ladies & one gentleman,” she worried that the disparity in numbers was a “foreshadowing of future events” (p. 154). Still refusing to believe reports of Confederate defeats, she clung to unsubstantiated accounts of an armistice and European intervention for nearly a month after Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia.

At the end of May 1865, House returned to Knoxville. Unlike many Confederate women who stopped writing in their diaries almost immediately after the war, House continued to chronicle her daily activities. There were the usual rounds of visiting, but the reconstruction of local society was halting and painful. House especially objected to drinking at parties, and, with the city still under military occupation, she remained nervous and ill at ease. Unionists and rebels alike moved to settle old scores; there were many shootings and several murders; the stationing of black troops in the city added to the tension. House’s attitude toward the victors remained unchanged, and she resented being “slaves to the vilest race that ever disgraced humanity” (p. 194). She claimed to have little feeling left except for an unremitting hatred of the Yankees. As late as November 1, House remarked about being “glad Lincoln was killed” (p. 190). She described the new president, Andrew Johnson, as a political opportunist currying southern favor for his own reelection. House might have continued to jot down such thoughts, but after her brother Johnny was shot to death by robbers in Nashville, she lost all interest in keeping a diary.

Students of the war are indebted to Daniel Sutherland for meticulously editing the House diary for publication. Identifying the many obscure individuals who are mentioned in passing must have been a daunting task by itself, but the editor has also carefully placed Ellen House’s diary in its historical context. House included reports and rumors of many military engagements, and Suther-

land carefully checked the accuracy of her information in the appropriate military records and newspapers.

The result is an edited document of great usefulness for exploring a host of topics. Like Sutherland's own recently published tour de force, *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861-1865*, the moving stories contained in *A Very Violent Rebel* reveal a very important part of southern civilians' Civil War. House's diary is also a significant new source for studying the internal conflict in East Tennessee and makes the bitter warfare between Unionists and Confederates come alive. Students wishing to examine critically the accounts of Union policy toward southern civilians by Stephen Ash and Mark Grimsley will find striking contrasts between

an ardent rebel's perceptions and the realities of military occupation. The publication of diaries and letter collections written by southern women has become a veritable flood in recent years. Ellen House's diary is a fine contribution to this important body of primary materials that is becoming widely available to researchers and general readers.

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