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Alice Fahs. *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. Xi + 410 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2581-5.

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Seeing Anew Civil War Popular Literature

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The success of Alice Fahs in *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865* rests in her ability to see anew what has always been right in front us: the vast number of novels, short stories, news reports, poems, songs, histories, children's fictions, and other print ephemera the Civil War inspired. Fahs refuses to fall prey to the dire pronouncements of earlier critics such as Daniel Aaron and Edmund Wilson, who encouraged us to see Civil War literature as naïve, partisan, crude, hasty-in short, as just plain bad and thus implicitly unworthy of extended scholarly study. Though Fahs' method is firmly historical, she follows in the tradition of literary scholars such as Jane Tompkins in her refusal to pass judgment on popular literature; rather, she attends to the crucial "cultural work" accomplished by the war's print culture. In conveying her fascination with and respect for this literature, Fahs has created an important intervention in Civil War history.

Given, as Fahs herself notes, the tremendous "outpouring" of popular literature across genre and region during the Civil War, it is clear from the outset that she has set herself an enormously ambitious task. Fahs heroically tackles the complex relationship between northern and southern literary culture; explores the many forms of popular print culture ranging from histories to stationery; examines both the symbolic and the commercial registers of literary production; and looks at how popular culture informed race, gender, and national identities. In her introduction she claims that popular war literature "participated in a cultural conversation concerning the evolving relationships between diverse individuals and the nation in wartime" (p. 2). In her efforts to examine the Civil War's popular literature in its totality-and to consider genre, region, economics, and identity politics in each of her chapters-Fahs can only paint that "cultural conversation" in broad strokes. In this regard I find Fahs' title something of a misnomer: one might be led to believe that the nature and complexity of "imagining" would be at the core of this study; rather it remains implicit. While I applaud Fahs for her focus on the popular, I am not clear as to how cartoons and history books, for example, are imagined similarly, or whether or not they imagine in the same ways.

However, the breadth of Fahs' research is distinctive. For example, Fahs' first chapter powerfully examines how the material circumstances of publication and distribution of literature during war-time affected its content. It is clear here and throughout the text that Fahs is thoroughly familiar with the many periodical publications of the war era. For example, in her discussion of the South's lack of publishing resources and reliance on northern literary culture Fahs weaves together quotes from the *Magnolia Weekly*, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and the *Southern Field and Fireside*, introducing the thick layering of diverse primary sources that she employs throughout. At the same time, she mines the private correspondence of key actors such as southern writer Paul Hamilton Hayne in order to elucidate how pecuniary matters influenced writers (p. 34). The chapter similarly ranges to descriptions of sheet music, stationery, souvenir cards, games, etc. One of Fahs' most original observations here is that the war became "visual" in the North in a way that it could not in the resource-poor South (p. 47).

In her next chapter on the war's popular verse, Fahs helps her readers to see distinctions among a seemingly homogeneous and unimaginative group of poems. Indeed, Fahs cites a war-era poem that itself satirizes the seeming "banality and even absurdity" of war-era poetry (p. 75). Rather than attending to the metaphoric language and imagery of the verse, Fahs nevertheless helpfully divides poems into sub-categories in this chapter (battle calls, flag poems, hymns, images of Christian soldiers, etc.). Her text emerges as a useful taxonomic tool in this and similar chapters.

In writing a history book about literature and literary

culture, Fahs has entered a disciplinary interstice that invites reviewers to assess her familiarity with nineteenth-century literary criticism. Her lack of in-depth engagement with that criticism is most evident to this literary critic in her chapters on poetry, the sentimentalized soldier, and the feminized war. Recent literary scholarship has questioned the coherence and utility of traditional categories such as "sentimental" and "feminized"-categories that seem to be a priori concepts in Fahs' text. In the "The Sentimentalized Soldier" Fahs argues, paradoxically, that the "highly conventionalized and typologized" sentimental soldier registered the public's insistence on "individual, personal meanings" of the war (p. 94). Again, she marshals a dazzling variety of sources to make her case, notably a speech by Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Poetry of the War," that asserts that literature forged links between the home front and battle front (p. 101). Yet many scholars, such as Phillip Fisher and Karen Sanchez-Eppler, have complicated the apparent meaning of the sentimental witness Fahs argues is central to renderings of hospital suffering.

Similarly, Fahs' chapter on women's literature seems not to take into account fully the ways in which recent work such as Elizabeth Young's *Disarming the Nation* complicates simple dualisms between masculine and feminine, public and private realms, home front and battle front concerns. Indeed the title of Fahs' chapter, "The Feminized War," reaffirms old notions that war is inherently masculine and, then, that when women writers take it on it is transformed. Issues of gender transgression are taken up more aggressively in Fahs' chapter on "The Sensational War," where she explores the way that the instabilities of war were often expressed as a sexual threat against vulnerable women who, as often, used the instabilities of the time to transcend their circumscribed roles. In this latter chapter, Fahs also reinvigorates her discussion of the economics of popular literature, showing how the war facilitated the development and sale of "cheap novels."

Fahs's later chapters on depictions of African Americans, children's fiction, and war-era humor are original and effective work. In particular, Fahs offers a sophisticated consideration of the way that popular war-era representations of African American men registered the ambivalence of white northerners towards black military service and emancipation, and the desire of white southerners to reinscribe antebellum stereotypes. What is most effective here and in her subsequent reading of Civil War humor is Fahs' weaving of textual and visual primary sources; for example, she uses the famous *Harper's Weekly* illustration, "A Typical Negro," to argue that the transformation of African Americans from property to citizen was incomplete (p. 171). Fahs continues in this vein in her chapter on war humor, where she shows how political and publication pressures informed the humorous verse and cartoons of the era. Though her claim that humor allowed for repressed dissent is conventional, Fahs sheds light on an extended and often brutal culture of war humor that is so often eschewed in favor of more sentimental war literature.

In her final chapters Fahs explores how popular literature made material links between the war and post-war periods. In her chapter on juvenile fiction, Fahs contends that the proliferation of boys' war fiction made an "important link to a postwar juvenile culture that stressed adventure and excitement" (p. 258). While Oliver Optic, Horatio Alger, and the other authors of boys' fiction Fahs examines might be more familiar to readers, her reclamation of the little-known girls' book, *Dora Darling, the Daughter of the Regiment*, is notable (p. 275). And in "The Market Value of Memory," Fahs once again encourages us to look afresh at what has always surrounded Civil War scholars-those ubiquitous tomes of Civil War-era histories. This chapter offers a useful catalogue of those texts and includes some wonderful material on subscription practices during the war and in the immediate post-bellum era. Most interesting are the implications of this chapter for historigraphy: Fahs implies that the (il)legitimacy of war histories became the battleground over what constituted valid history writing. Given how much war-era material she has taken on, Fahs' "Epilogue" can only gesture towards the legacy of the war's popular literature in the post-bellum period

What I like best about this impressive book is that Fahs refuses to offer easy answers, looking for "imagined differences" (p. 9) as often as she notes rhetorical similarities between northern and southern literary culture, sensation and sentiment, antebellum and war-era literary productions. etc. As she concludes, the war "invited a diverse spectrum of ordinary people to imagine themselves as part of the conflict" (p. 311). Fahs has produced a study that is itself diverse and suggestive, a well-written book that highlights crucial and previously overlooked texts.

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