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Amy L. Wink. *She Left Nothing in Particular: The Autobiographical Legacy of Nineteenth-Century Women's Diaries.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001. xxxvi + 162 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-145-7.

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Published on H-SAWH (June, 2003)

Combating Powerlessness with Pen and Ink

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While vacationing in Pinopolis, South Carolina, in October 1859, Grace Latimer Whittle commented on a common annoyance to travelers in the American South–mosquitoes. Grace reported to her aunts in Philadelphia that she had seen only one of the pesky insects and heard two more from her vantage point on Lake Moultrie. "I am sure," she wrote with confidence, "you must give me credit for being an accurate historian, at least on this subject." Four years after witnessing a yellow fever epidemic in Norfolk, Virginia, Grace remained wary of warm weather and relieved to see the dangerous summer season of disease end with autumn's first frost. In her journal, Grace had penned a vivid report of the 1855 epidemic and its effects. Her undated account, written in a small lined book purchased from a local stationery store, is evidently the only journal volume Grace left behind. The story she tells in it is a compelling one.[1]

Most nineteenth-century women, like Grace Whittle, cast only the faintest shadow on the historical record, making their surviving letters, diaries, and journals all the more important. In *She Left Nothing in Particular*, Amy L. Wink explores the value of these writings as literary and historical sources. Her approach is rooted in feminist literary analysis and psychological thought (her book began as a dissertation in English literature), so historians may find this book long on theory and short on context. Wink's argument, however, is a powerful one. She contends that women deliberately used their writings as a form of resistance and a tool of self-definition. By keeping diaries, women were asserting themselves in a world that often seemed to have no have place for them. "Private writing," Wink argues, "offers women agency in situations where they otherwise seem powerless" (p. xv).

Three pairs of women's diaries from the 1850s and 1860s form the book's core. The first chapter focuses on the diaries of two women who traveled with their families on the Oregon Trail: seventeen-year-old Abigail Jane Scott, who headed west in 1852, and Jean Rio Baker, a forty-year-old Mormon widow who traveled from England to Salt Lake City in 1851. Both women used their diaries to deal with the day-to-day challenges of frontier life, attempting to impose order on a strange new world that seemed wild and dangerous. Scott was bound for Oregon with her parents, five sisters, and three brothers in a wagon train of nearly fifty people. Before the six-month journey from Illinois to the Willamette Valley ended, she had lost her mother and youngest brother to cholera. Scott was responsible for keeping a family record of the trip (except for a time when she was ill with cholera); she described the unfamiliar landscape in detail and found comfort in the beauty of nature, despite the horrors of the journey. Jean Baker lost her four-year-old son on the crossing from Liverpool to New Orleans, and in her diary she poignantly describes his burial at sea. The trip, she confided to her journal, was a bitter disappointment, "a Bubble that has burst in my grasp" (p. 31). Both Scott and Baker tried to make their unfamiliar surroundings less threatening by recording them, thereby attempting to impose some level of control and predictability on their lives.

Wink's second chapter explores the lives of Henrietta Baker Embree and Tennessee Keys Embree, first and second wives (respectively) of an abusive husband in mid-nineteenth-century Texas. Both women initially used their diaries to define themselves, creating a place (at least on paper) where they were independent and in charge of their destinies. Sadly, the diaries reflect the precipitous decline of both women under John W. Embree's constant criticism. Henrietta's diary begins in 1856, when she was nearly twenty-two, and ends seven years later, when she died from tuberculosis. Knowing that she was terminally ill, the first Mrs. Embree wrote for her sister and young daughter in her "dear old blue book"; similarly, the second Mrs. Embree kept a diary

for her daughter, Beulah. While the Embree women used their journals to combat isolation (and give advice to their daughters), both ultimately found themselves defeated by their husband's abusive behavior.

In her third chapter, Wink uses the diaries of Lizzie Hatcher Simons and Cornelia Noble–both Texans–to explore the impact of the Civil War on southern women and their writings. Throughout *She Left Nothing in Particular*, but most notably in chapter 3, the voices of women are sometimes lost beneath Wink's analysis. Much of the historical context for these nineteenth-century women, including basic biographical information, is relegated to the endnotes. Much of this material could have been incorporated, with good results, into the chapters themselves. Of the six diaries Wink examined, none were read in manuscript; two were published (Scott and Baker in Kenneth L. Holmes's edited collection, *Covered Wagon Women*) and four survive only in typescript.[2] While it is troubling to historians that only these transcribed (and possibly edited) versions have surfaced, it is also indicative of the relatively low importance often placed on the writings of women by their contemporaries and descendants.

In *She Left Nothing in Particular*, Wink combines a close reading of selected diaries with interpretations gleaned from a multidisciplinary scholarly literature on western women's writings, Victorian travel literature, and feminist theory. These women, Wink concludes, "applied writing to make themselves and their experiences of consequence." By doing so, they were "resisting and adapting to outside definitions, [and] maintaining their own sense of themselves" as they confronted the erosion of their individual identities (p. 133). Amy L. Wink's book reminds us of the importance of women's private writings and their usefulness in telling the stories of the past, insights that historians of southern women will certainly appreciate.

Notes

[1]. Conway Whittle to Frances M. Lewis and Mary W. Neale, 13 Oct. 1856, with a note from Grace L. Whittle, and Grace Whittle Diary, Conway Whittle Family Papers, Manuscripts and Rare Books Department, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA.

[2]. Kenneth L. Holmes and David C. Duniway, eds., *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1890* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark, 1983-), vols. 3 (Baker's diary) and 5 (Scott's diary).

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Citation: Jennifer D. McDaid. Review of Wink, Amy L., *She Left Nothing in Particular: The Autobiographical Legacy of Nineteenth-Century Women's Diaries.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7737

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