

Thomas W. Cutrer, ed.. *Oh, What a Lonesome Time I Had: The Civil War Letters of Major William Morel Moxley, Eighteenth Alabama Infantry, and Emily Beck Moxley.* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2002. xiv + 276 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8173-1118-6.



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When William Moxley left home in July 1861 to join the Confederate army, he left his wife, Emily, to care for the couple's five young children. That summer, Emily had her hands full caring for nine-year-old George, six-year-old Mary, five-year-old Laura, three-year-old Willie, and little Davis--just one when his father left. During the war, the Alabama countryside was plagued with disease and crime, and Emily feared for her own and her children's safety. Like many southern women, at first Emily resented that her husband's absence left her without the male protection to which she had become accustomed, but she quickly became proficient in providing for and protecting her family. Alone and three months pregnant, Emily put her five children to bed and went to work fixing the front door of the family's home, because, as she explained to her husband, "I was afraid to lie down at night with the door open" (p. 28). Indeed, strangers entered the house several weeks later, breaking a trunk and stealing a few objects, and the incident brought more urgency to Emily's efforts to secure the house against deserters and others who took what little food and clothing Emily had for her family. Whereas her early letters

were filled with questions about managing the farm and the family's finances, Emily increasingly relied on her own judgment and less on her husband's.

Thomas Cutrer has done a fine job collecting and editing the letters exchanged between William and Emily Moxley, offering readers the opportunity to see the war from the perspective of one rural yeoman farm family. William enlisted when he was thirty-seven years old and his wife was twenty-five, and for the next seven months, the couple exchanged letters that are deeply affectionate and chock full of the minutiae of everyday life. Emily's letters detail her efforts to feed and clothe her family, to deal with dishonest friends and neighbors, and to protect her children from disease and hunger. In his letters, William is remarkably solicitous of his wife's feelings--lying to her about his ill-health and the dangers of army life and dutifully writing to her father and looking out for her soldier-brothers. Perceiving his wife's growing independence, William gently reminded Emily to look out for her health. "Will you not quit the use of snuff," he writes his young wife in her

sixth month of pregnancy, "for he that loves you so dearly though 500 miles away?" (p. 61).

As strong and independent as Emily had become in her husband's absence, however, she dreaded her pending confinement. As a physician who enjoyed a close relationship with his young wife, William planned to come home to help Emily deliver their sixth child, due in late February or early March. But as the months dragged on, both William and Emily expressed their mounting anxiety as it became increasingly obvious that William would not be by her side, as he had been for her first five deliveries. In a period when northern women were consciously limiting their family size and Emily's slaveholding neighbors might have controlled theirs, Emily's childbearing pattern reminds us of the toll frequent births took on yeoman and poor rural women. Emily first became a mother when she was sixteen and then gave birth on average every eighteen months, but in the absence of her husband—in whom she expressed great confidence—Emily's anxiety becomes palpable. Just weeks before her own confinement, Emily records the untimely death of a neighbor, Sarah Ann Shaw, during delivery. "Oh, what a sudden death. You see, there is no Dr. here that is worth any thing. I think if you had been with her you could have saved her," Emily writes, adding "if you cant come, I hope god will be with me and bear me up in my troubles" (p. 118). Emily's remarks are prescient—within a month, she, too, dies delivering her and William's sixth child.

As Cutrer explains in his introduction to this collection, Emily and William Moxley's letters are most interesting in their "domestic content" (p. 8). Indeed, whereas William was careful not to include information pertaining to military matters so as not to compound his young wife's worries, Cutrer is at pains to fill in the blanks here, devoting the beginnings of his chapters to explanations of military operations, changes in command, and the movements of Moxley's regiment. While I applaud his effort in this regard, these interludes

seem to interrupt an otherwise delightfully personal account of wartime courage and sacrifice. Perhaps my experience with northern women has ill-prepared me to fully comprehend the Moxleys' situation, but I searched in vain through Cutrer's narrative to understand why Emily was so utterly alone. Though the Confederate government pleaded with women not to send letters that would compromise soldier morale, what arrangements did the state and federal governments make to care for the families of soldiers? As the blockade strangled the southern economy, women begged their husbands to return home and rioted for bread. Emily received a few meager supplies from her husband but was forced to borrow money for everything, including stamps for her letters and shoes for her children. Faced with deprivations of all sorts, women in Emily's position complained to the Confederate war department about the high price of food and the absence of physicians on the home front. Clearly, the Moxleys' letters detail many of the unrecorded civilian costs of war—starvation, violence, disease, and death. Cutrer's collection would have been strengthened had he included more context in this regard and less reference to the military situation.

One of the many valuable contributions this collection makes to our understanding of this period is that it helps to close the emotional distance historians long believed existed between Victorian women and men. Though distant in years and miles, William and Emily's relationship was intimate. Before their affectionate correspondence comes abruptly to a halt, the genuine emotions expressed in their letters traverse the geographic distance between Emily and William. Emily misses William's company so much that she describes vivid dreams of being with him. "One time I a wake and found my arm extended as I had thought I had hold of your hand," Emily writes, "can you imagine the disappointment I met on waking, for when a sleep I was in your company and hold of your hand, that hand that has always been ready to afford me relief in sickness" (p. 41).

And William is equally expressive when Emily's letters anthropomorphize, bringing his young wife to his side. "My Dear Emily, you stated your letter to me was watered with your tears," William explains, "(w)ell, our tears mingled for I could not help it, neither did try to help it" (p. 27). After reading this collection of letters, no one would dare question the legitimacy of the love and tenderness shared between this farmer-doctor and his wife. And many will want to know more about the "domestic" matters that both sustained and distracted the average Civil War soldier.

A contemporary of Emily Moxley, Rebecca Pilsbury of Brazoria, Texas, ended a wartime diary entry by noting that "another day has passed of little incident but of such are the lives of everyday people and they are perhaps the most important class in the community, they quietly, and unostentatiously pass through the journey of life, performing little duties and pass to their long home but little missed." [1] Faced with raising five young children without his wife and "friend," William surely missed Emily in the years to come. In fact, William left the army to be with his children shortly before his regiment fought at the Battle of Shiloh. Recovering and making available collections like the Moxleys' is vitally important to expanding our knowledge of the ways in which the homefront interacted with the battlefield. When and how did soldiers decide that their families had suffered enough in their absence and decide to leave their posts? And how did the aggregate of these individual decisions ultimately influence the war's outcome? These are questions that we can begin to answer as we reconstruct the lives of yeoman farm women and men as Cutrer has here. George Rable compared his efforts to reconstruct the lives of Southern white women to working on "a vast jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing." [2] Cutrer's recovery work has added to this ongoing and worthwhile effort.

Notes

[1]. George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 3.

[2]. Ibid.

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