H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas R. Taber, ed. *Hard Breathing Days: The Civil War Letters of Cora Beach Benton, Albion, New York, 1862-1865.* Albion: Almeron Press, 2003. ii + 501 pp. $36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9726766-0-1.

Reviewed by Victoria C. H. Resnick (Department of History, Indiana University)

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2004)

A True History of the Weary, Tired Wives At Home

Hard Breathing Days collects the 167 letters that Cora Benton wrote almost weekly between September 1862 and June 1865 to her husband Charlie, during his service in the Union Army. The volume also includes some letters written by friends and family members, including Cora's three brothers, who also served in the Union Army. The editor, Thomas Tabor, purchased most of the letters at an auction and then compiled them chronologically. While the letters themselves are interesting and well worth reading, the volume would have benefited from additional editing, including an introductory essay to establish the context and importance of the correspondence.

During the war years, Cora Benton transformed from a frightened and rather lost young woman, who was pregnant with their second child when Charlie left, to a confident and self-assured mature woman. Faced with mounting bills, children to feed and clothe, and taxes to be paid, Cora began the war in a state of wretched loneliness. By the end of the war, however, she had opened her own school, made financial arrangements with tenants, and informed her husband that when he returned, "there will be two heads after this do you understand, darling? " (p. 416). Despite this newfound steel, Cora still embodied the Victorian wife in small-town America.

Cora was fortunate in having a large group of family and friends to call upon for assistance and support. Every Saturday, sometimes more often, Cora recounted each of these interactions, along with all of the local news and happenings in Albion, New York, in her letters to Charlie. These portraits of small-town life in the North during the war are one of the collection's greatest strengths. The letters offer vivid first-hand examples of general trends and attitudes of the period, such as the universal confidence that the war would soon end, as early as 1862, and the tremendous financial difficulties inflicted upon military families by the government's delays in paying the soldiers' wages. Equally interesting are the exchanges about whiskey bottles in the soldiers' tents, various diseases that run through Albion, and the passing around of information from person to person about causalities and captures.

The personal details of these letters are even more compelling. Charlie and Cora obviously adored each other, their children, and their families, and the accounts of visits back and forth, not only in Albion but also among soldiers who visit while passing through another unit's territory, make for some of the most compelling reading. Cora herself is a perfect example of the trends that appear in lecture and discussion for any American history class examining the nineteenth century. She worried about her husband's health, offering advice and remedies, but she was even more concerned about his soul. Throughout their correspondence, Cora urged Charlie to accept Christ as his savior, and reminded him of her own faith. Particularly in the first year of their separation, Cora pleaded with her husband that when he returned, the two of them would be able to attend full services together. In the summer of 1863, for example, she planned to hear a friend's husband preach and says, "I wish you were going to be there with me" (p. 225). One of the greatest emotional hardships for Cora during the war was that poverty prevented her from purchasing a proper hat for nearly a year, and without a hat, she could not attend church (pp. 386-387).

Very much a Victorian lady, Cora remained conscious of a woman's need to preserve her reputation. Though grateful for the assistance and company of George Ough,

Charlie's boss, when he used Cora's parlor to court her already engaged sister, Cora told him not to set foot in the house again until her husband came home. Worried about her sister and the two men involved, Cora's greatest concern, however, was for the reputation of her children (p. 336).

Although Charlie escaped much of the fighting, Cora's brother Howard saw action several times, including the battle of Gettysburg. His occasional letters to Charlie and the Beach family are a marked contrast to Cora's Albion letters. Faced with disease as well as short or no rations, Howard did his best to discourage the youngest Beach son from joining the army. Despite being very fond of Vallie, her youngest brother, Cora's letters to Charlie also make it clear that the family worried about his wild ways. Though he was enthusiastic about serving with the military, the army repeatedly turned down Vallie's enlistment, due to the state of his lungs. Vallie did finally enlist with the 22nd New York Cavalry and found the experience to be as difficult as Howard had warned.

Thomas Tabor has done a magnificent job transcribing the letters and deciphering all of Cora's abbreviations for various geographic locations, for which Cora usually gave only an initial, and full names where Cora used a diminutive ("Mrs. H. Cleveland," short for Henry, p. 201). He also adds illustrations throughout the text, not only of friends and family, but also of places and even passing references; when Charlie and Cora discuss the recent wedding of Tom Thumb and a picture which appeared in the newspapers, Tabor provides it alongside their words (p. 106). In late 1864, Charlie sent his wife a piece of a cotton plant, and Tabor reproduces the pressed flower as it now appears (p. 403).

Unfortunately, the friends and family members in Cora's letters are not as carefully delineated. Several people have the same first name, and while Tabor is confident that their identity is clear from the context, this is not always the case. For example, there are several Jennies mentioned in the correspondence, and Tabor is confident that the reader will know from context which one is intended (p. v). With such a large cast of characters, this is difficult at best.

There is an index at the back of the book, which lists every person, place, and event, but it is not fully helpful to a reader. We learn that Mrs. Phelps was married to Mr. Phelps and the index lists every occasion on which her name is mentioned, but the glossary does not reveal her relation to Cora or Charlie. Without an introductory essay, analysis of the letters, or an afterword, this book's scholarly character is not what it ought to be, as this is truly an extraordinary collection of letters. Many readers would benefit from a family tree for the Beach and Benton families and historical context regarding the town of Albion, the Union Army, and the homefront.

The additional letters in the collection, sent by brothers, friends, and family to Charlie, are interesting, but it is not clear how these were selected for inclusion. Tabor indicates that at least a few of Charlie's letters have survived and he occasionally draws upon them to clarify a point in someone else's letter. Yet none of this extant correspondence appears in the volume. Cora frequently mentions letters that others sent to Charlie; it is unclear why Tabor has chosen to include all of the letters written by family friend Jennie Lee Flint and Howard Beach, to the exclusion of others.

The confusion is irrelevant to the enjoyment of the letters and the value of having the full correspondence of a Union soldier's wife in print. While letters, diaries, and studies of Confederate women are published regularly, there are relatively few works devoted to Union women and their homefront experiences. Cora Beach Benton feared that "a true history of the weary, tried wives at home" would be "pathetic" (p. 454). Instead, her letters provide a powerful and in-depth glimpse into life on the Northern home front.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar

Citation: Victoria C. H. Resnick. Review of Taber, Thomas R., ed., *Hard Breathing Days: The Civil War Letters of Cora Beach Benton, Albion, New York, 1862-1865.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9382

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.