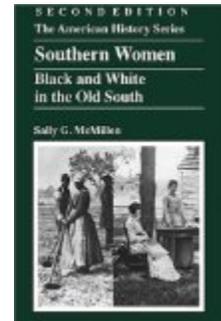


# H-Net Reviews

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Sally G. McMillen. *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*. Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2002. xii + 215 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88295-963-4.

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## Rethinking Southern Women

In 2002, Harlan Davidson published the second edition of Sally G. McMillen's *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, a synthesis in the American History Series. As the editors write in the foreword, the series intends "to offer our readers a survey of what today's historians are saying about the central themes and aspects of the American past" (p. vii). The explosion of scholarship in southern women's history since McMillen's volume first appeared in 1992 suggests that the field indeed deserves its place among those central themes of American history and explains the need for the revised edition of *Southern Women*. In this brief—and economical—volume, McMillen skillfully integrates the historical literature of the last decade with the scholarship she surveyed in 1992. The result is a highly readable synthesis useful to beginners and experts in the field.

The forty-odd volumes in the American History Series are intended primarily for classroom use at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Although it easily stands alone, professors might most profitably assign *Southern Women* to graduate students as a complement to a group of monographs, because McMillen provides a wide-ranging overview of the field. Equally important, McMillen indicates particular areas where research is thin, such as inter-class relations among white women, or where controversy persists, such as sexuality (especially interracial), the structure of the slave family, and the relevance of "separate spheres" discourse to the South. *Southern Women* also gives readers concrete details that stick usefully in the mind. Both secondary-school and college teachers can mine *Southern Women* for lecture

material.

McMillen opens by referring to key myths of southern history and how they have obscured precise historical knowledge of southern women. In particular, myths about "delicate" plantation mistresses and "matriarchal" or "profligate" black women impede the historical reconstruction of "southern women's contributions, sacrifices, hardships, joys, and most important, their individuality" (p. 1). According to McMillen, "it is essential that the tale of southern women be told," in part precisely because "they have seemed almost invisible to researchers" until quite recently (p. 2).

Faced with the apparent absence of women from many types of public documents and statistical accounts, scholars have mined personal papers, including journals, letters, family bibles, and accounts; church records; material artifacts, such as clothing and architecture; oral histories; travel narratives; census data; and court proceedings of many kinds. McMillen herself integrates a wide range of primary and secondary research in her effort to cover not just slaveholding women but also female slaves and poor rural women. Immigrant and Native American women, however, lie beyond her purview, an indication of the need for more mining of the sources in order to tell southern women's history fully.

McMillen goes on to sketch briefly the contours of southern history in the colonial and early national periods. Newcomers to the field will find this a useful primer. In particular, they should note her conclusion that most white southern women lived in a significant degree of

isolation because “the region lacked the institutional and social interaction available in urban areas to middle-class northern women” (p. 6). Very much in keeping with the conclusions of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, among others, this comment should prompt readers to ask what differentiated southern rural women from northern rural women.[1] That question in turn brings us back to McMillen’s assertion that “slavery was the most distinctive characteristic of the Old South” (p. 4). Throughout, she provides ample evidence of the ways slavery shaped southern women, enslaved and free, slaveholding and non-slaveholding. At the same time, she avoids the common error of implying that all black women were slaves and all white women were slaveholders.

In her first chapter, McMillen examines southern families, looking at family structure and stability, courtship, miscegenation and sexuality, married women’s changing legal status, and the dynamics of marriage itself. Family was “the principal source of strength in black and white women’s lives,” McMillen tells us, yet simultaneously it “placed some of the greatest demands on their emotions, time, energy, and health” (p. 13). That point is especially clear for slave women. The gradual balancing of the sex ratio in the nineteenth century made it easier for slaves to form families, but keeping those families intact was quite another matter. Forced separations through sale or relocation sundered many families in body, if not in spirit, while “abroad” marriages ensured that some families never shared a living space on more than an irregular basis.

McMillen briefly traces the now-familiar debate about the structure of slave families: nuclear, extended, or single-parent; matrifocal, matriarchal, or patriarchal. She also points to regional variety. Piedmont and mountain slaves “rarely enjoyed the support of large, stable families and communities” that could emerge on larger plantations, in part because small-scale slaveholders were especially likely to view slaves as an investment readily bought and sold (p. 15). White women’s kinship networks resembled those of slave women in that both groups drew emotional and material support from extended as well as nuclear families, though slave women relied on such ties on a more regular basis. McMillen also points out the ironic possibility that bondswomen had more freedom in courtship and more daily support from other women than white women enjoyed.

In discussing interracial sex, a particularly productive subfield in the last decade, McMillen generally treads carefully. She incorporates new literature that explores

the possibility for love across the color line, while asserting that rape was a fundamental consequence of slave ownership. However, her comment that “some slave women became predators and seductresses” might strike some readers as an unfortunate (and surely unintended) reinforcement of racist stereotypes about black women’s sexual voracity (p. 28). Yet the observation is an important reminder that slaves were far from powerless in the face of the South’s rigid socio-legal hierarchies.

Oddly, that same awareness is somewhat lacking a few pages later, where McMillen asserts that “no bondman could protect a wife or daughter against rape without risking his own life” (p. 33). Slaves did risk their lives if they openly opposed a slaveholder’s will, and yet some did protest and live to tell. Moreover slave men (and women) had many ways to influence their owners short of—and in advance of—open confrontation, as Walter Johnson has recently argued in the context of slave sales.[2] Later in the book, when she discusses enslaved women’s successful resistance to their owners’ demands, McMillen appears far more confident about slaves’ ability to shape their bondage.

McMillen’s treatment of courtship also raises some questions. She asserts that during slave courtship men sometimes doggedly pursued women and occasionally paid conjurers to put a spell on them. McMillen thus implies that at least some black men regarded black women as conquests, which is a different rendering of romance than appears in her discussion of white courtship. There, McMillen sees power operating in a different way: during courtship, where white women briefly controlled the relationship. McMillen maintains that “many antebellum white women dreamed of a companionate relationship, expecting that in marriage, they would find a friend, a lover, and soulmate for life,” yet she suggests that they were doomed to disappointment because the inequality within their marriages would preclude such companionship (p. 23). In fact, the vision of companionship that antebellum southern white women absorbed from contemporary sentimental fiction and prescriptive literature was usually quite compatible with patriarchal marriage.

The second chapter explores reproduction and childrearing, drawing in part on McMillen’s own research.[3] McMillen makes the grimmer aspects of these experiences perfectly clear as she sketches maternal mortality, miscarriage, childhood diseases such as neonatal tetanus and worms, the unrelenting work of nursing and child-care, and infant death. Yet she also suggests that motherhood provided southern women with greater satisfaction

and public recognition than nearly anything else they could do. It was, in short, “a woman’s ‘sacred occupation’” (p. 89). While slaveholding women had more freedom to define their own mothering than did slaves, when able to do so, slave mothers “put their children first” (pp. 87-88).

Still, McMillen questions “whether their maternal role provided women with a heightened sense of self-worth and power” (p. 75). This qualification suggests some interesting terrain for further research. Did viewing motherhood as a “sacred occupation” perhaps erode the self-worth of some women by making them fear that if they failed in their maternal duties, their children’s souls and worldly prospects would be blighted? What sociological factors—besides race and slavery—affected how southern mothers assessed their success and measured their worth? And how did southern mothers, free and slave, compare with northerners in their hopes, fears, and strategies for their children, especially the very young?

In chapter three, McMillen turns to education and religion. As she points out, the Second Great Awakening increased southern interest in women’s schooling, and many southern schools were denominational. Southern churches and schools taught very similar messages to white women in this period, advising them to accept their primarily domestic, subordinate role in society. Practical education for slaves, free black women, and yeomen’s daughters included important lessons for survival, from the forms of resistance that slave parents passed on to their children to the housewifery that farm girls learned from their mothers.

Church disciplinary proceedings against female sinners reinforced the value of accommodation, although women sometimes used their churches to assert a degree of independence and to gain a measure of protection against abusive husbands or owners. Many black women relied on their faith and their fellow worshippers for a measure of spiritual and psychological protection against the degradation of slavery and white racism. McMillen concludes that both black and white women found in their faith “the strength to withstand the burdens of their lives” (p. 117).

Chapter 4 turns to the topic of women and work. Like many other scholars, McMillen insists that southern women worked, and worked hard. She is particularly attentive to the ways that illness, pregnancy, and migration to the frontier could increase the physical and social toll of women’s work. She insists also on the va-

riety of women’s work in the Old South, which ranged from domestic service to industrial employment and entrepreneurship. Most often women’s work was unpaid, such as white women’s labor within their households and slave women’s “triple duty as plantation workers, wives, and mothers” (p. 121). Less commonly, southern women received remuneration for their work, as mill and factory workers, teachers, seamstresses, tavern-keepers, domestic servants, or prostitutes.

The merits of this chapter are somewhat undermined by a section in which McMillen traces how some women moved beyond the constraints of their prescribed roles.[4] Some free women of color became substantial property owners, for example, while some slaveholding women managed plantations successfully, and others became involved in the American Colonization Society in the early 1830s and the Whig Party in the 1840s. McMillen summarizes this research fairly, but she places it in a section titled “nontraditional roles.” Yet a number of scholars have traced fairly widespread property ownership among free women of color in places like New Orleans back to the colonial period; such property ownership was therefore neither novel nor, arguably, nontraditional.[5] Similarly, many slaveholding women faced the burden of running a household, either during their husbands’ absences or after their deaths. And those Virginia women who became active Whigs were not really joining “the traditional male world of southern politics” (p. 142). Rather, they were participating in something quite new: well-organized mass political parties with innovative campaign strategies and new ways to involve—and exclude—women.

When recent information about what southern women were doing—some of it rather surprising—appears in a section on “nontraditional roles,” the implication is that this recent scholarship has not really changed what we thought we knew about both southern women and southern men. Luckily, readers who consult the bibliographic essay at the end of *Southern Women* will get a clearer sense of how McMillen assesses the potential of the newest scholarship in these areas.

McMillen’s final chapter addresses the Civil War years. In thirty pages, McMillen provides a concise overview of how the war altered the material, legal, social, political, and ideological context of southern women’s lives, in ways that both confirmed and transformed antebellum patterns. On the one hand, for example, prior to the war southern women had developed considerable strength in the face of adversity. On the other,

unprecedented difficulties and suffering slowly eroded white women's support for the Confederacy, while enslaved women's resistance now had the power to help end slavery, rather than simply shape it. Here too, McMillen flags areas for more research, such as slave women's vulnerability to rape during wartime.

McMillen ends her story by looking toward the post-war years and the ongoing debate over whether and how the war improved black and white women's lives in the long term. McMillen suggests that in new, and sometimes worse, circumstances, white and black women continued to look to "families, churches, and communities for strength" (p. 186). In McMillen's view, these institutions had long helped women shape their circumstances, not just endure them. Accordingly, it's hard to grasp McMillen's last sentence: "Nearly a century would pass before southern women, both black and white, would recognize and come to grips with racial and gender inequality" (p. 186). Recognition certainly did not take a century, and the history of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries contains many examples of black and white women trying to come to grips with inequalities of race and gender, mostly separately, but occasionally together.

For its many strengths, the new edition of *Southern Women* has earned a place on the bookshelf of any historian of southern women. It also belongs on the reading list of any graduate student preparing for comprehensive exams in southern, southern women's, or U.S. women's history. Both groups will want to pay close attention to the bibliographic essay. They may also enjoy testing their ability to identify the particular scholars McMillen draws on at various points in her narrative, since the text has no footnotes. Even some undergraduate students and devotees of southern history outside the academy can enjoy and profit from this cogent synthesis. Not the least of the

book's virtues is the way it encourages readers to engage McMillen's assertion that "it is essential that the tale of southern women be told" (p. 2).

#### Notes

[1]. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). See also Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[2]. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[3]. Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

[4]. Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Cara Anzilotti, *In the Affairs of the World: Women, Patriarchy, and Power in Colonial South Carolina* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002); Katherine G. Goodwin, "'A Woman's Curiosity': Martha Gaffney and Cotton Planting on the Texas Frontier," *East Texas Historical Journal* 24, no. 2 (1986): pp. 4-17; and Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

[5]. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie, eds., *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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