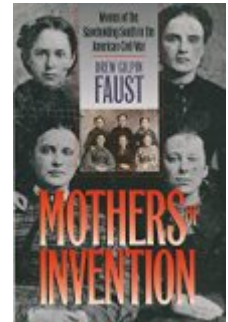


Drew Gilpin Faust. *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War.* Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xvi + 326 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), \$15.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-2255-5.



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Drew Gilpin Faust offers a complex and richly nuanced portrait of elite southern white women during the Civil War. The conflict that fundamentally altered race relations and challenged traditional hierarchy in the South also forced women to reevaluate their place in society. As a result of their wartime experience, women "sought to invent new foundations for self-definition and self-worth" (p. 7). Disillusioned with their men who had proved unable to protect them and profoundly aware of their own limitations when independent, they emerged from the war with "a conflicted legacy" (p. 256). At war's end, women were determined never to be helpless again, but they recognized the necessity of patriarchy to protect their status as white women. No gender solidarity here; elite white women set to work to shore up their men and reestablish a social hierarchy that assured them a privileged place. Faust provides an elegant analysis of how the Civil War both undermined and sustained traditional patriarchal attitudes among elite white women.

Drawing on the diaries, letters, and memoirs of five hundred southern women, in addition to a

vast array of newspapers, novels, songs, government documents, and records of female organizations, Faust reconstructs the changing sense of self that Confederate women experienced as they confronted the perils of a war fought on their own soil. The turmoil caused by that war forced southern women to become "mothers of invention" on many fronts. At the commencement of the war, women moved from the private to the public sphere. Goaded by "feelings of uselessness" (p. 20), women organized to promote the patriotic cause. Building on Jean E. Friedman's *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (1985), Faust recognizes the limited participation of antebellum women in public affairs and sees the war as a stimulus to the growth of female voluntary associations. Whether it was knitting socks, rolling bandages, petitioning the government, presenting patriotic tableaux, or raising funds for the cause, these organizations brought large numbers of women into public life for the first time. More, they assumed a different attitude toward the fruits of their work. Not content simply to turn over to the government monies they had raised, women affected public

policy when, for example, they were emboldened to insist that their contributions should be spent for the purchase and building of gunboats to protect their homes, towns, and cities.

While women were inventive in restructuring households and doing without or substituting for accustomed goods, the most significant change in their lives came with the assumption of slave management. The peculiar institution was based on mastery. When responsibility for managing slaves devolved to women, it challenged the concept of women as submissive, passive, and subordinate. Moreover, their inability to master their slaves (a problem that became greater as the war ground on) ultimately "did much to undermine women's active support for both slavery and the Confederate cause" (p. 56). Frustration at their own inadequacy and defeated by their burdensome duty to control slaves, "many slave mistresses," according to Faust, "began to persuade themselves that the institution had become a greater inconvenience than benefit" (p. 73). Illustrative of the tension between the hold of traditional gender roles and the pull of women's new self awareness is the experience of Lizzie Neblett. Feeling that she had failed to manage adequately either her overseer or her slaves, she was ready to give up the institution altogether; yet she still longed for "one good negro to wait upon me" (p. 70).

Representative of the complexity of Faust's portrait of southern women is her analysis of Benjamin Butler's General Order No. 28 in New Orleans which, she demonstrates, "drove to the heart of the ambiguities in white southern women's identities" (p. 209). To curtail women's insulting behavior toward Union soldiers and thereby maintain order in the occupied city, Butler proclaimed his intention to treat all offending women as he would prostitutes. While recognizing the public power of women, he controlled them by threatening their identities as ladies. That was all it took; women obeyed. As Faust concludes, "Confederate women fled from the responsibility of

empowerment into the reassuring safety of tradition's protective shelter" (p. 211).

Elite women's struggles to survive in the war-torn South forced them into different roles (of teacher, nurse, clerk, spy, and soldier), new habits (of reading, writing, and dress), and changed attitudes (toward religion, courtship, and marriage). They invented a sense of self, according to Faust, based on "individual right and identity, of self-interest, that was strikingly modern" (p. 242). When, in desperation, they began to insist that their men give up the war and come home, their demands were based on their perception that they, too, had "needs, interests, and even rights, not just duties and obligations" (p. 235).

In the end, southern women once again embraced patriarchy. Their rationale in accepting it, however, had changed. As Lucy Buck explained, "We shall never any of us be the same as we have been" (p. 3). The Civil War had profoundly shaken women's confidence in their men, religion, state, and society. With clear-eyed realism, they weighed the privileges of patriarchy against its inequities and chose "the cherished prerogatives of race and class, of whiteness and elitism" (p. 233).

Mothers of Invention is an important book that will be the foundation for future interpretations of the meaning of the Civil War to southern women. Faust has added complexity and ambiguity to our vision of southern women, and historians will hereafter have to contend with many of the issues she has raised. Some will assert that women had always known the value of patriarchy. They will ask whether the war, after all, was simply a chance women seized.

Mothers of Invention will require further investigations into whether the war made significant, long-lasting changes for women. Essential reading for Civil War historians, it is an evocative and persuasively argued reinterpretation of the inner lives of elite southern women.

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