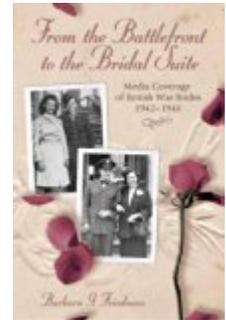


Barbara G. Friedman. *From the Battlefield to the Bridal Suite: Media Coverage of British War Brides, 1942-1946.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007. 154 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8262-1718-9.



Reviewed by Jenny Thompson

Published on H-War (March, 2008)

During and immediately following World War II, one million marriages between American soldiers and women from countries other than the United States took place. In Great Britain, where two million American soldiers were stationed or passed through during the war, the inevitable "fraternization" between GIs and British women constituted a concern for the U.S. and British governments, a newsworthy and debated subject on the American home front, and a real experience for thousands of men and women caught in the realities of a world at war. By 1947, 70,000 British women had left England for the United States to join their American husbands, most sailing there on "bride ships." The U.S. government's passage of the War Brides Act in December 1946 paved their way to enter the United States as non-quota immigrants (p. 97). Barbara G. Friedman, assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, explores the subject of British war brides by examining how their stories were presented, interpreted, and ultimately, "co-opted" (p. 2) in British and American mass media.

Drawing from a variety of disciplines including history, sociology, and communication, Friedman's book is an excellent chronicle of media coverage of the war bride phenomenon, both in the United States and Great Britain. It is also a fascinating study of related issues, including U.S. and British attitudes and experiences during the war, dominant discourses on sexuality and marriage, and the ways that fears and concerns about women's roles during wartime played out in the public sphere.

Written in clear prose, the book offers an in-depth look at a subject that has been written about before, but, as Friedman argues, has been handled largely with a nostalgic approach. Further, she asserts, the experiences of war brides have been isolated from the canon of the history of war. Thus, Friedman views her book "as a kind of reclamation project" (p. 11), an attempt to reclaim the historical experiences of women during war not as ancillary, but primary, since, as she observes, these "women's experiences are as much a product of war as any soldier's" (p. 9).

Freidman begins her study with an overview of the larger context in which American soldiers were deployed in Great Britain, including an interesting discussion of British views of American men (shaped primarily through Hollywood). She moves on to devote a chapter each to an examination and comparison of war brides coverage in British and American Armed Services publications, British and American newspapers, and British and American women's magazines. Her concluding chapter offers a wider view of the war brides' experiences, and analysis.

Friedman shows how the mass media in both the United States and Great Britain presented the British war bride to their audiences. She effectively traces how and why coverage changed over time, arguing that the coverage was anything but pure reportage; instead, it was driven by the "discrete agendas" that lay behind a particular publication's messages (p. 4). Thus, as Friedman shows, coverage reflected an intent to frame the issue of war brides not only according to a publication's specific audience (e.g., military personnel, American or British women on the home front), but also to larger issues, including concern with soldiers' morale, moral interpretations of women's sexuality and identity, and the allied governments' desire to maintain positive relationships.

In U.S. Armed Forces publications, for example, the initial portrayal of the war bride, and of British women in general, reflected attempts by the U.S. military and government to discourage relationships between GIs and British women. The unmarried British woman was presented to readers as a "predator," a highly sexualized opportunist who sought a relationship with an American soldier for his money or a free ticket to the United States. She was also (inexplicably) the primary source for an alarmingly high rate of venereal disease among troops. Only after it became clear that efforts to restrict relationships were of no effect, the focus shifted and the frame changed. Now, faced with the prospects of tens of

thousands of new British immigrants coming to the United States, the war bride was presented as a modern pioneer. She was eager and innocent--a housewife "in-training," (p. 68) who was a "reassuring sign of postwar domesticity" (p. 3).

Friedman does an excellent job of showing how such shifts in interpretations were dictated by attempts to shape public opinion. More importantly, she shows how they reflected dominant views of women's "proper" roles in wartime as well as "conflicting expectations of women in wartime" (p. 36). Particularly in Great Britain, where the civilian war experience was far more intense and dangerous than in the United States, fear concerning the fate of the nation was played out in the ways women's behavior was evaluated. Thus, media outlets seemed to provide a kind of moral compass, interpreting the behavior of British women according to standards of so-called decency, domesticity, and national ideals concerning the future health of the nation. However, as Friedman asserts, "gendered ideas concerning women's roles in wartime often conflicted with their lived realities" (p. 125). Thus, throughout the book, Friedman interjects the voices of real women found in diaries, memoirs, and letters. These sources, Friedman argues, "fill in gaps of coverage left by mass media" (p. 7).

But in fact, as Friedman cogently asserts, the real voices of these women offer more than an addition to her study. They contrast sharply with the ways in which war brides were presented through the mass media. For the realities of the lives of these women were not shaped by arguments concerning morality or domesticity. They were comprised by the daily experiences of food shortages and air raids, shaped memories of the toll of the last world war, and fears about the future. At the same time, however, women's wartime experiences in Great Britain were also shaped by what was, for many women, their first taste of independence. As the British government encouraged (and even required) women to work

outside the home, drafted some 80,000 women into the Land Army, and even required them to show British hospitality by welcoming GIs into their homes, thousands of British women found themselves holding jobs, earning money, and feeling emboldened by their newfound freedom. Their lives were, in short, transformed by war. But at the same time, they also faced a wartime double standard concerning the expectations of women's behavior. Encouraged to work and expected to act independently, they were also condemned for acting upon their freedom by, for example, having relationships with American GIs. So, while Friedman perceives that the conditions of war created the ideal condition for romances to flourish, she finds that there were "considerable contradictions in official attitudes toward women's sexuality in wartime, and between military discouragement of Anglo-American relationships and wartime policies that may have fostered them" (p. 34).

Friedman effectively contrasts the mass media's presented "reality" against the real experiences of women, and in doing so, she handily dismisses the idea that women's wartime experiences remain on the periphery of war. Herein lays one of the primary strengths of Friedman's study. In showing how these women's experiences were a product of a war, she succeeds in showing how women are indeed "integral to war" (p. 132). In this way, Friedman's work joins a growing body of scholarship concerned with expanding the whole notion of how to study war's impact. Friedman's work is an important contribution to the study of gender and war and the role of the mass media during wartime. Moreover, it is a welcome contribution to the body of literature that seeks to examine war's impact on societies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Jenny Thompson. Review of Friedman, Barbara G. *From the Battlefield to the Bridal Suite: Media Coverage of British War Brides, 1942-1946*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14291>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.