



Thavolia Glymph. *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation.* Littlefield History of the Civil War Era Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 392 pp. Ill. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-5363-1.

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Women's Roles and the Transformative Power of Emancipation

A major interpretive theme in Thavolia Glymph's provocative *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* is her observation that "the majority of American women stood and fought (or not) on the ground where the war first found them" (p. 13). And where the Civil War intruded upon women's daily lives most severely was at home (a "domestic sanctuary" for some), which made the war, among other things, a crucible of ideologies about home, emancipation, sectional politics, and citizenship. Black women experienced all of this to a greater degree than white women. "No other group of American women," notes Glymph, "had to wage war on as many fronts while endowed with so few rights as African American women" (p. 10). *The Women's Fight* seeks to go beyond the more familiar stories to explore wartime women as citizens and noncitizens, partisans and noncombatants, even political actors—all fundamentally invested in defining the sanctuary of home.

To tease out these lesser-known stories, Glymph organizes the book into three rather conventional parts: "Southern Women," "Northern Women," and "The Hard Hand of War." While "Northern" and "Southern" make for convenient

organizational labels, considerable published scholarship within the past decade has expanded Civil War historiography and demonstrated the need to differentiate the experiences of Midwesterners, particularly women, from those of Eastern women. The labeling and the sampling of women's voices in this study are mainly Eastern in focus, which perpetuates a gap some have worked to close. But this does not take away from the richness of the narrative voice and the often elegant writing throughout.

While Glymph carefully delineates the complexities of race, class, and power relations, and the sociopolitical ideologies that contrived to define them, especially among Southern women, she appears at times to conflate intentions and motivations. The first chapter focuses on defense of home through the prism of South Carolina low country slaveholding women forced to flee the war and live as refugees, a status that disempowered them and brought them in closer contact with poor and enslaved women. More symbolically, Glymph maintains, the fall of these women's plantation homes and their flight from them represented disastrous cracks in the institution of slavery that held it all together. Less convincing

are the author's abstract assertions about the comingling of the meanings of home with the protection of both white women and slavery. A proslavery nation required all of these to remain intact. "When the war put white women on the road involuntarily," she writes, "it tested the Confederacy's ability to defend white homes and slavery and prevent the degradation of white women" (p. 23). Is this to say that the entire American South was bound up in the well-being of the very small percentage who constituted elite white slaveholding women? Or, that this is what drove Confederate men to keep enlisting in a brutal war, knowing that their absence from their small to middling farms would threaten the survival of the women and children in their own households, most of which did not include enslaved people (which is not to say they were not proslavery)? Finally, what does it suggest about Southern support for "domestic sanctuaries" when the leader of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, mocked, faced down, and even threatened harm to at least one Richmond crowd dominated by white women protesting the lack of access to food, bread, and necessities for *their* families during the war? Despite these seeming contradictions with the author's premises, there is no denying that Southern women's homes across racial and class divides were significantly destabilized during and after the war.

While Glymph's two-chapter section on Northern women is less satisfying due to its narrow Northeastern focus, it is nonetheless compelling for its insightful look at two notable circumstances: the dynamics of class and race among abolitionist women, patriotism, and home front mobilization, and the approximately one thousand missionary-minded Northeastern women who, with deeply engrained ideas about gender, race, and freedom in tow, were drawn to the South in the early days of emancipation. Concerning home front mobilization, the author identifies economic and political factors that guided New England women's participation in war relief efforts, particularly those tied to abolitionism. Glymph finds, for

example, that wealthy white abolitionist women were not actually as radically antislavery as they thought themselves to be. The complexity of Northern society is evident in the variety of female responses to calls for patriotic support of Union soldiers and families. Some domestic laborers supported the war through specific relief tasks in wealthier women's homes, while other laboring women took employment in arsenals. Local soldiers aid societies' goals were often at odds with those of the US Sanitary Commission and its regional affiliates, leading to pushback and conflicts. Overall, organizing strategies contended with class conflict, poverty, disconnected rural towns, Peace Democrats, and those who decried women's "apathy" versus those whose demanding daily lives left no time for relief work. Black women's organizing in support of soldiers' families is only briefly addressed.

Like the chapter on refugee women in the South, one highlighting Northern women inspired to come south and work with the freedpeople reveals the gender, racial, and class tensions that accompanied these interactions, often in surprising ways. We see this in studio photos depicting Northern white middle-class women with their young black students, which, Glymph theorizes, worked to displace or minimize the role of black mothers. This aligned with a prevailing though not unchallenged view that "white women deemed themselves best suited to oversee and domesticate black life" (p. 172). More egregious were those Northern white women who assumed the mistress role formerly held by slaveholding women, seemingly unaware of the cluster of prejudices they outwardly manifested in their interactions with the freedpeople.

The final two chapters form part 3, "The Hard Hand of War." The focus in the first is on the dangerous convergence of home front and battlefield, with particularly dire implications for enslaved and black refugee women. Glymph contrasts Southern white women's grievances about the

war's toll (especially as emancipation came to the fore) with the harsher treatment black women experienced at the hands of Union soldiers. She builds upon this in the following chapter with a fascinating analysis of how the actions of black refugee women, in camps and on plantations, inaugurated the "work of making freedom" (p. 224). The path was fraught with challenges, sometimes even resulting in a "voluntary" decision to become re-enslaved to survive. The author masterfully shows how these stories of largely invisible women better inform the historiography.

While there is room to disagree with Glymph's interpretations of the intentions and motivations of the people she writes about, *The Women's Fight* is excellently researched, offering crucial insight about how these lesser-known women's roles were conduits for the transformative power of emancipation.

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