
Reviewed by Thomas F. Curran (Cor Jesu Academy)

Published on H-CivWar (September, 2023)

Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

Larry Wood identifies himself as a storyteller. An independent writer, Wood has utilized his talent in numerous books focusing particularly on Missouri history, including several on the Civil War. His latest publication, *Lady Rebels of Civil War Missouri*, can be seen as a follow-up to his 2016 work *Bushwhacker Belles: The Sisters, Wives, and Girlfriends of Missouri Guerrillas*. Wood also reveals that he is first a writer and then an historian. He admits that his “focus is on human interest and not so much on historical analysis” (p. 9). He leaves that task to other authors, including this reviewer.

There is a place and a market for books like this. Genealogists, antiquarians, Civil War roundtable members, and armchair historians will find this work appealing. That is not to say that academic scholars will not consider the volume of use. Wood has done some deep-diving in his research to uncover the stories of the women he investigates, and I admit that I could have used some of his discoveries in fleshing out stories related in my book *Women Making War*. [1]

The women Wood discusses in his vignettes include a few connected with some of the more notable Missouri guerrilla partisans, including Jane Haller, the mother of William Quantrill’s lieutenant, William Haller, and Mary Jane Duncan, who allegedly was a friend of Sam Hildebrand. While their associations with these or other Confederate fighters bore no impact on the course of the war, these women’s stories reveal aspects of the “household” nature of the conflict where guerrilla strife prevailed. More closely associated with the conduct of the war were the women associated with Rebel mail carrier Absalom Grimes’s clandestine network of operatives, in particular Marion Wall Vail, whom Grimes considered “one of the most energetic of all my assistants.” [2]

The volume also contains the narratives of some of the more unique stories found among Missouri’s Confederate women, including Lizzie Powell and Kate Beattie. An unrepentant Rebel,
Powell along with friend Maggie Creath obtained and smuggled under their petticoats a huge amount of gun caps, several pistols, and other supplies to guerrillas in Monroe County. Powell left a rare diary account of her time in custody, which spanned seven months and included imprisonment in several locations in northeastern Missouri. Even after being paroled and later released from that obligation, she remained a thorn in Federal authorities’ sides until she finally left the state, by choice, for Nevada. Kate Beattie, on the other hand, had been engaged in smuggling goods from St. Louis to the Confederates until she decided to impersonate the wife of Confederate Major Enoch Wolf, scheduled to be executed in retaliation for the murder of a Union major and other soldiers, in order to try to obtain his freedom. Her scheme fell apart when the prisoner, allowed to meet her face-to-face, denied knowing who she was. Evidently he was unaware of the plan. Charged with violating the laws of war, spying, and fraudulent practices in relation to her impersonation, Beattie became one of the few women arrested and imprisoned in the St. Louis area (more than 440 by my account) who were forced to wear a ball and chain while in custody. The military commission that tried Beattie found her guilty only of fraudulent practices, which she had admitted. As the war neared its end, she was banished to the South, but soon after returned and received an unconditional release.

Many of the women Wood includes experienced banishment, mostly to the South, but occasionally to other places. Those headed down the Mississippi for Confederate lines included Addie Haynes, Lucie Nicholson, and Hattie Snodgrass, who were among the dozen or so women expelled from Union lines from St. Louis in May 1863, a story that has been well documented and retold many times. They represented the first mass banishment of women from St. Louis to beyond the lines, but certainly not the last. Wood’s approach of separate chapters for the eighteen women he includes (two chapters cover two women, the rest one), with Haynes’s, Nicholson’s, and Snodgrass’s stories laid out in consecutive chapters, gives the relating of the incident a disjointed and incomplete quality. Wood includes the story of Pauline White, one of the few women sent to the Missouri State Penitentiary once found guilty of violating a previously taken loyalty oath and corresponding with the enemy. Yet missing from the volume are any accounts of the numerous women found guilty of aiding Missouri guerrillas and Sterling Price’s invading Confederate army in the latter part of 1864 and 1865 and sentenced to the Alton Military Prison in Illinois.

Still, those interested in compelling stories about the Civil War without academic jargon or a theoretical framework will find Lady Rebels of Civil War Missouri interesting, but with this caveat: there is a faint Lost Cause tone to some of Wood’s prose. For instance, when introducing the story of Mary Jane Duncan, arrested in early March 1865 for aiding guerrillas, Wood notes that “even in the late winter and early spring of 1865, as it became increasingly obvious that Union victory in the Civil War was just a matter of time, Missouri women with Southern sympathies continued to come into the clutches of Union justice” (p. 122). Wood omits that late in the war Missouri still remained a chaotic place, with Federal personnel drained to the East to complete the campaigns that brought an end to the Confederacy and Missouri Rebel guerrillas still desperately fighting for a cause already lost. In this unsettled environment, Federal authorities continued to use whatever means necessary to do their job, including the arrest of Missouri’s lady Rebels.

Notes


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


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58743

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