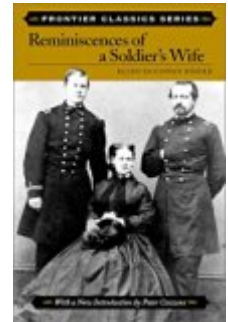


Ellen McGowan Biddle. *Reminiscences of a Soldier's Wife*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2002. xxiii + 257 pp. \$12.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8117-2058-8.



Reviewed by Jean A. Stuntz

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Sacrifice, Sugar-Coated

Ellen McGowan Biddle, born in 1847 to a New Jersey family with a tradition of service in the navy, married an army officer from Pennsylvania when she was seventeen. She accompanied her husband during his service in the South during Reconstruction and in the West afterward. Her reminiscences were written in 1907.

Peter Cozzens wrote an introduction that places this work firmly within the genre of memoirs written by women who went west with their army husbands after the Civil War. Such works tend to stress how difficult life was for these women and their families, how dangerous it was, and how many obstacles had to be overcome, but Biddle's account is a little different. She includes those things, but instead stresses how kind everyone was to her and her family.

Reminiscences begins when her husband, always referred to as the Colonel, was posted to Reconstruction-era Macon, Georgia. They lived in a former slave cabin, with few comforts, but what she wrote about were the kind Southern women who welcomed her into their church. They were

soon posted to Natchez, Mississippi. Biddle spent most of the second chapter talking about how kind the people of Mississippi were.

The only places or people that Biddle does not describe in overly flattering terms were found in Texas. The Colonel was posted to Brenham to put down the great violence occurring there. Not only was Ellen confined more than she wanted, due to the threat of violence, but the people were unfriendly and the weather was terrible. She became gravely ill and had to return to Philadelphia. She stayed with her parents for some months, until her husband was posted to Nevada, where she joined him.

Once Biddle was in the West, the reminiscences discuss more of the day-to-day life of soldiers and their families, and less of outside wonders. She traveled much, and was always struck by the beauty and grandeur of the wide-open spaces. She was, however, terrified of Indians. In this, she reflected the prejudices of the time, seeing the Indians as ugly, hostile savages, ready to kill whites at the slightest provocation.

While Biddle's description of life in the western forts is mostly unbiased, she absolutely fawned over every visiting dignitary. Every famous man was a god-like hero in her eyes. There are good photographs of many of the people she met and places she went. Such photographs are also about the only way the reader can catch a glimpse of the Biddles, as the author said little about herself or her family.

Reminiscences of a Soldier's Wife should be read by anyone researching army life in the Post-Civil War West. The book lacks an index of all the people Biddle talked about and all the places she visited, which would have made it more helpful, but the author does include recipes for how to make an apple pie without apples and egg custard without eggs (p. 173). She also included several apparently official army documents, such as reports praising the Colonel (p. 228), but these would have to be cross-checked with official sources, as there are no citations.

The only major fault of this book as a reliable source is the syrupy sweetness with which it was written. Biddle apparently believed in saying nothing bad about anybody, so all of her descriptions reek of niceness. She also makes light of the very real sacrifices that she and other army officers' wives endured, from poor food and shelter, to lack of respect by army regulations, to Indian attacks and disease. Still, the book does contain valuable information for western historians, if they can sift out the sugar.

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