

Recovered Memory: Kindly 'Daughters Of Maine' Nursed Bodies And Souls

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Recommended Citation

Garrison, Nancy Scripture (2000) "Recovered Memory: Kindly 'Daughters Of Maine' Nursed Bodies And Souls," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss3/21>

Review

RECOVERED MEMORY

Kindly 'Daughters of Maine' nursed bodies and souls

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Summer 2000

Sudlow, Lynda L. *A Vast Army of Women: Maine's Uncounted Forces in the American Civil War.* Thomas Publications, ISBN 1577470494

Driving north from Boston on the way to Southwest Harbor, Maine, I always slow for an intersection outside Ellsworth, familiar now through many summers, where Route 1 joins the road from Blue Hill to form a tree-shaded oasis, remote from the stream of eastbound traffic. Guarding this little park stands the statue of a Union infantryman who gazes steadily ahead, rifle at his side, pack on his back, seeing inwardly, perhaps, the ravaged meadows of Antietam or bloodied thickets of the Wilderness. Memorialized in stark, indigenous rock, he is a Son of Maine, come home from the War.

Far less publicly celebrated than this northern soldier have been his female counterparts: women of Maine who served the Union as best they might, with grit and ingenuity, just behind, or often beside, their husbands and brothers at the front. It is this previously unsung company of women that Lynda L. Sudlow has chosen as the focus of her enlightening new history. **A Vast Army of Women** reminds us that assertive, innovative service was not solely the province of men between 1861 and 1865, and furthermore that the fortunes of the North were significantly enhanced by the energy and perseverance of women.

The result of Sudlow's labor is an inspiring chronicle of nurses, foot soldiers, doctors, relief workers, and home front organizers distinguished for their ability. Sudlow rescues these women from obscurity, skillfully reconstructing their stories to form a narrative based on their own writings and the testimonials of others. She also examines the critical roles played by the United States Sanitary Commission, the Maine Camp Hospital Association, and other volunteer organizations staffed largely by women and traditionally overlooked in Civil War histories.

Individual women of Maine are singled out, and their experiences detailed with thoroughness and respect: visionary Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, enterprising nurse and teacher Amy Morris Bradley, and the indomitable Sarah Sampson. Perhaps most memorable of all is writer Elizabeth Akers, who managed to combine the rigors of Washington journalism with army nursing - and at the same time produced poetry of lyrical, Whitmanesque beauty evoking pride and an unbearable sense of loss.

Sudlow's research and documentation are impeccable, and her presentation clear and scholarly, if occasionally monotonous in its repetition of parallel experiences shared by large numbers of women. Yet these repeated memories become doubly significant because of their pervasiveness, dramatizing yet again how neglected such sources have been in the collective canon of this saddest of conflicts. Sudlow contributes to the growing body of American women's history with discipline and professionalism. **A Vast Army of Women** is both a valuable addition to the literature and an engrossing read.

Nancy Scripture Garrison is a guest lecturer in Women's Studies at Curry College and a contributor to North & South magazine. She is the author of With Courage and Delicacy (1999), an analysis of the U.S. Sanitary Commission and its elite transport nurses during the Peninsula campaign.