

Double Trouble: Seneca Falls Sisters Return South As The War Heats Up

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Review

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Seneca Falls sisters return south as the war heats up

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Monfredo, Miriam Grace *Sisters of Cain*. Berkley Publishing Group, 2000-09-01. ISBN 042517672X

In ***Sisters of Cain***, the seventh book in Miriam Grace Monfredo's Seneca Falls chronicle, the plot heads south again with the outbreak of the Civil War. Bronwen and Kathryn Llyr, nieces of librarian Glynis Tryon, whose feminist activities began the Seneca Falls series of murder mysteries, now appear on the scene of 1862 America as, respectively, a Union spy for the Treasury Department's intelligence operations and a Union nurse in one of the makeshift hospitals in Washington, D.C.

Much of the plot for this tale hinges on the conflict between Lincoln and McClellan at the start of the Peninsula campaign of 1862 and also involves the fight between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac* and a search for saboteurs who would destroy the Union's famous ironclad. Thrown into the mix are a secessionist attempt to assassinate Bronwen, a double agent betraying U.S. spies in Richmond, and a budding romance between Kathryn and Gregg Travis, a volunteer physician. Medicine, domestic and international politics, the Sanitary Commission, Dorothea Dix and her nurses, various Cabinet officers, and Richmond unionist Elizabeth Van Lew all show up as well.

Bronwen Llyr, the former Pinkerton detective turned Treasury agent, seems particularly ill-suited for the role of spy, being prone to rushing in where angels fear to tread, disobeying orders, and ignoring conventions that might better disguise her groundbreaking role as a woman spy. The most successful spies are, ultimately, the least conspicuous, and red-haired, hot-headed Bronwen is not possessed of the patience nor the aptitude for the discretion necessary in an espionage agent. She may be fun, but she's not convincing even as a mid-19th century renegade.

As has been true with all of Monfredo's mysteries, cameo appearances by noted historical figures of the time evince highly accurate research. The novelist's portrayal of Lincoln in particular is to be praised. She creates a president far more lifelike than the usual hagiographical figure that shows up in fiction and nonfiction alike. The plot and character development of the other players in her work, however, are a tad confusing and rushed, leaving the reader to desire a slower pace and less frenetic activity—in other words, a novel that reads more like a tale of the mid-19th rather than the late-20th century.

For fans of Monfredo, the mix of fact and suspense will no doubt satisfy. Scholars of the Civil War will find **Sisters of Cain's** mildly engaging text to be breezy and distinct from sedate renditions of the 19th century.

Janet L. Coryell is a professor of history at Western Michigan University, specializing in the antebellum/Civil War period as well as U.S. women's history. She published Neither Heroine Nor Fool: Anna Ella Carroll of Maryland (1990), a biography of pamphleteer and woman politico Anne Carroll, whom Bronwen Llyr might well have met.