

One Vast Hospital

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Feature Essay

ONE VAST HOSPITAL

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Pember, Phoebe Yates and Rable, George C. *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: A Southern Woman's Story: Phoebe Yates Pember With an Introduction by George C. Rable.* University of South, \$14.95 ISBN 1570034516

One vast hospital

That the Confederacy's Secretary of War, Judah P. Benjamin of New Orleans, was Jewish is an interesting, well-known fact. Almost equally well-known since 1866 is that, metaphorically, one of the Confederacy's most effective generals was Jewish. A childless widow, Phoebe Yates Pember, held the post of chief matron at the Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond more successfully than most generals held forts. And she lost fewer battles, except for those she lost to death in her valiant efforts to feed and comfort 76,000 Virginia and Maryland casualties throughout the war. Her adversaries were hospital administrators and surgeons who were disdainful of her petticoat government of the hospital complex, food shortages, a colonel who refused her a seat in a rail car, ambulatory patients demanding access to the whiskey barrel, hordes of visitors, and the strong-willed but too-refined ladies whose style of care was more trouble than it was worth.

Ever since her story appeared serially in *Cosmopolite*, beginning in the January 1866 issue only months after the end of the war, historians have had access to her vivid, harrowing, sometimes humorous stories and insights about life on the home front in the besieged capital of the Confederacy where results of the generals' decisions arrived in droves of bleeding men. In book form, her memoir, **A Southern Woman's Story**, published in 1879, has long been a source from which historians have often quoted. With an introduction by George C. Rable, University of South Carolina Press has reissued this realistic and well-written work in its *American Civil War Classics Series*, edited by Gary W.

Gallagher and Robert K. Krick (Columbia, South Carolina, ISBN 1570034516, \$14.95, softcover). She is an outstanding example of the many Southern Jews, not only women, but merchants and even rabbis, who were fiercely patriotic, as Robert Rosen thoroughly documents in *The Jewish Confederates* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

General Pember not only writes about the many situations in which she took charge, her style itself is a take-charge battery of rhetoric. Her voice is never that of the hypersensitive, delicate Southern lady with a backbone of steel; rather the steel is visible in every line, whether she delineates hospital horrors, satirizes the foibles of administrators and surgeons, dramatizes a deathbed scene, or discharges witty insights. Having moved among thousands of maimed soldiers, Pember observes that a woman must soar beyond the conventional modesty considered correct under different circumstances.

If the ordeal does not chasten and purify her nature, if the contemplation of suffering and endurance does not make her wiser and better, and if the daily fire through which she passes does not draw from her nature the sweet fragrance of benevolence, charity, and love--then, indeed a hospital has been no fit place for her!

Hers is the elevated Victorian style at its finest, expressing the attitudes of an upper class gentlewoman. Invading the realm of the warrior male, she took up rhetoric like a sword and wielded it both in vigorous narrative and in confrontational dialogue.

A tone of arrogance and egocentrism pervades her memoir but with the self-awareness of a writer who assumes her reader will enjoy, on the evidence, her sense of having met and conquered the enemy.

An enduring voice worth preserving, Phoebe Yates Pember's stark descriptions of this enormous hospital embodies Whitman's lament that America has been turned into one vast hospital.

Founding Director of the United States Civil War Center, David Madden is the author of three books on the Civil War, including a novel, Sharpshooter. He is coeditor of the Classics of Civil War Fiction series for the University of Alabama Press.