

### Outrageous Women of Civil War Times

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## Review

Mercher, Virginia

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**Furbee, Mary Rodd** *Outrageous Women of Civil War Times*. John Wiley & Sons, \$12.95 ISBN 471229261

Fascinating Females

Book seeks to highlight historical figures

I have mixed feelings about this book. On the surface the premise is a good one—it offers young girls exciting stories about women in history and shows them that women have played an important role in the shaping of the past. The author included biographies of the following women: Louisa May Alcott, Amelia Bloomer, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix, Harriet Tubman, Belle Boyd, Pauline Cushman, Loreta Janeta Valezquez, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Varina Howell Davis. Sprinkled among the more extensive biographies were sidebar articles featuring other well-known women and topics associated with women's suffrage, the underground railroad, doctors, nurses, and the press.

The books for suggested reading would be helpful for children or parents by suggesting additional books about outstanding women in the nineteenth century. There are a number of books and the topics cover areas such as the underground railroad, nurses, writers, history, suffrage, and the Civil War.

Despite the positive aspects of the book, there were some negatives. The scope of emphasis was on unusual and outstanding women but the author completely ignored the typical women of the time period. Those women endured extremely difficult circumstances; coped without knowing if their loved ones were dead or alive; managed the farm or became the breadwinner of the family; provided their family with food and clothing in adverse conditions; fled armies and still managed to triumph and survive the war. Granted those women were not outrageous but they were heroic and deserve recognition as much as the women mentioned in the book. The author did the readers a disservice by not

exposing them to some of the more representative women of the time period, rather than only the atypical women that were showcased in the book. In addition, some of the women included in the book only had tenuous connections to the Civil War, such as Amelia Bloomer and Susan B. Anthony. Most of the women included in the last section of the book, *Other Outrageous Women of Civil War Times* had no real connection to the Civil War.

Although the sidebars offered additional information about other women and related subjects, they were distracting when reading the main sections of each chapter. The eyes were drawn to the highlighted sidebar area and interrupted the flow of reading and comprehension. The sidebars could have been included at the end of each section or contained in last section of the book, where other women were profiled. The information would still have been included but would not have been a distracting element.

Accuracy was sometimes a problem and in the initial reading the book, I found several errors that were disturbing. In the introduction on page 5, Furbee stated that South Carolina succeeded from the Union in 1861, but the state left the Union on December 20, 1860. In her description of vivandieres, on page 26, the author refers to a uniform, but from my research, vivandieres did not wear the outfit described, but an adaptation of men's wool uniform trousers. Most of the vivandieres left the army and returned home after 1861 and only a few stayed during the entire war or were flag bearers in combat. In the section on Amelia Bloomer the author indicated that bloomers were worn by only a few women but actually they were worn by a great many women traveling west on wagon trains; bloomer outfits were commonly worn by girls and women exercising and were shown in various period magazines such as *Godey's* and *Peterson's*. On page 24, the author indicated that in 1840, women's dresses weighed between eight and sixteen pounds, which is an exaggeration; the entire weight of all a woman's clothing may have weighed around ten pounds. After hoops were introduced in 1856, the number of petticoats that were worn was reduced and the weight of the entire ensemble was greatly diminished. On page 60, it was mentioned that Sarah Morgan was a Confederate nurse, but in reading her diary, nursing was not what she was known for. There were a number of other southern nurses who could have been mentioned, such as Phoebe Pember Yates and Kate Cummings.

An additional distraction was the author's use of modern slang phrases, such as "Louisa was found conked out" on page 10; "the judge wised up" on page 33; and "she hatched a secret plan" on page 89. The modern phrases did not add to

the content and seemed to be out of place. Although this book was intended for children, it is not a reason to include informal slang phrases.

The cover of the book was colorful and eye-catching, but inaccurate. The woman pictured was wearing incorrect clothing, stockings and shoes and had flowing hair. The illustration did not seem to be related to any particular character from the book. In my opinion, pictures of the women profiled would have made a better and more effective cover.

I found the title to be misleading because these women were not outrageous but were just strong-willed women who were forward thinking and progressive for their time period. This particular book is a companion to the author's other books, *Outrageous Women of Colonial America* and *Outrageous Women of the American Frontier* and additional books on the same theme offered by the publisher. Not having read the other books in this series, I can't comment on their content or accuracy. The author, Mary Rodd Furbee, is a part-time writing and journalism instructor at West Virginia School of Journalism in Morgantown, West Virginia and is also the author of five children's books.

*Virginia Mescher, a social, domestic and food historian, is a 1972 graduate of Virginia Tech in Home Economics specializing in Housing, Management and Family Development, and primary, secondary, and adult education. She has been involved in living history interpretation since 1988 and specializes in material culture and domestic activities. A frequent contributor to publications associated with the Civil War, she writes a column for her website, and has written a number of books, the titles of which may be found on the her website, under the AModern Books@ link. She owns Vintage Volumes, which publishes books and games related to nineteenth century culture and may be contacted via her web site, <http://www.vintagevolumes.com> or at [vmescher@vt.edu](mailto:vmescher@vt.edu).*