

The Confederate Belle

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Review

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Roberts, Giselle *The Confederate Belle*. University of Missouri Press, \$32.50
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Southern Ladies

Author examines role of young aristocrats

During the years 1861-1865, America was torn between many groups who were trying to mold the future of the country. There was no one left untouched during those four years; even the elite women of the South emerged scarred. Giselle Roberts provides an excellent study of young, upper-class Confederate women during and more importantly after the Civil War. She uses diaries, memoirs, and letters from women in Mississippi and Louisiana to bring their struggles to life. The women in her study were saddened not only by the loss of loved ones but by the loss of a way of life that was shattered on the battlefield, never to rise again.

After the freeing of the slaves, these privileged belles had to manage their households, taking on many tasks previously delegated to forced labor. Gone were the days of quiet afternoons of reading poetry, visiting friends, and attending elaborate balls and picnics to which these women were accustomed. Cooking, sewing, gardening, and tending the fields now occupied their time. These tasks that were ordinary to most women helped them weather the war and acquire skills that weaned them from a way of life made possible by the institution of slavery. The belles of the Confederacy were seen by many to be delicate flowers; however, the war revealed their physical and mental strength. Many assisted in the war effort and found that performing the undignified tasks of household chores was not the end of the world.

Roberts makes clear the importance southern women placed on being perceived as ladies, and how desperately critical they felt it was to hold on to their feminine ideals. Feelings of patriotism ran very deep, yet paradoxically,

being patriotic sometimes left them feeling very vulnerable and unfeminine. For example, many southerners saw a belle's participation in the organized programs to raise funds for the war as very unladylike. Also, some of this generation of southern women supplemented their income by teaching their talents to neighboring students. This practice would continue after the war as a way to survive but was continually condemned for being un-feminine. Keeping up appearances weighed heavily upon them during those four years of conflict and the years that followed. While these young women sewed and mended uniforms for the soldiers as a patriotic duty they felt that to do the same work on their own clothes was demeaning. The author addresses the many luxuries that were given up for the Confederate cause and how these changes compounded feelings of defeat when women felt that their sacrifices were made for nothing.

Roberts has done a great job presenting this study of young wealthy southern women. The book is very well documented with an extensive bibliography, photographs, and illustrations that bring these women to life for the reader. In later years many Confederate women expressed their melancholy when reflecting upon the past and life before the war. Historians cannot help understanding these feelings especially while visiting a battlefield, strolling along the streets of a ghost town, inhaling the musty fragrance of antiques or by simply looking into the faded photographs of those who did their best to shape our country. The reader will come away from this book with a better understanding of what life was like for belles, and their larger role in Confederate culture.

Jory Reedy lives in Topeka, Kansas. This is her sixth review for Civil War Book Review. She earned a B.A. in History from Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, and serves as the editor of the Trans-Mississippian, which is the newsletter for the Civil War Roundtable of Eastern Kansas.