

Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879

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Review

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Varon, Elizabeth R. *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy.* Oxford University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 195142284

Union espionage:

Gender masking the master spy

Known to many only as Crazy Bet, accounts of Elizabeth Van Lew's pro-Union actions of espionage and spying in Richmond during the Civil War have made somewhat of a comeback in recent years. In addition to the publication of her wartime diaries, she is featured prominently in Edwin C. Fishel's path breaking study of Civil War espionage and intelligence, *The Secret War for the Union*. More recently, Van Lew served as an important focal point in Nelson Lankford's study of the final days of the Confederate capital in *Richmond Burning*. With the publication of the present volume, Elizabeth Varon has provided a rich account of a complex and important figure in wartime Richmond.

Varon's Van Lew reflects the wide range of political and moral sentiment in the upper South in the years leading to and through the Civil War, and this can be seen in the choices of busts and pictures that occupied Van Lew's home in the prestigious Church Hill neighborhood of Richmond. They included a bust of Ulysses S. Grant, Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts, Virginia politician John Minor Botts, and Senator Charles Sumner. Such a wide range of identification reminds us that Southerners did not subscribe to one monolithic moral code or set of political beliefs. Indeed, Varon's biography fits neatly into recent studies by noted historians, Daniel Crofts, William Freehling, and Peter Kolchin who have provided important analyses of the pitfalls related to generalizing about the South; much of the upper South identified closely with the North and in the case of Virginia it rejected secession three times in 1861. According to Varon, Elizabeth Van Lew symbolized, more than any other single

individual, the existence of an abiding and active Union sentiment in Richmond.

Varon provides a thorough analysis of Van Lew's early years. She enjoyed the status and privilege that went along with being born into Richmond's high society, which included frequent visits to spas in western Virginia and social functions with other elite Richmonders. Though attached economically and personally to slavery (the family owned 21 slaves in 1850) Van Lew harbored an early hatred with the South's peculiar institution. According to Van Lew, slavery stunted the growth of democracy among white Southerners and reinforced a strong sense of arrogance and self-righteousness, not to mention that it was cruel and inhumane for blacks. Most importantly, the economic dependency and sense of superiority that went along with living in a slave society led directly to secession in 1860 and 1861. Varon suggests that Van Lew's doubts concerning the morality of slavery can be traced to her mother's own moral outlook that in the end forced her to lead a kind of double life. This ability to conceal her own feelings about slavery would serve her well throughout the war.

The secession crisis and Virginia's choice to align itself with the newly created Confederacy radicalized Van Lew, according to Varon by gradually disabusing her of the notion that one could compromise with slaveholders and slavery. Van Lew believed the Confederacy to be illegal and illegitimate and when war finally arrived, she began a four-year double life in which she would make a series of public displays intended to divert Confederate suspicion while she prayed, hoped and worked for the Union. While she pretended to have compassion for suffering Confederate soldiers, she sympathized with and provided aid to Union prisoners held in Richmond's military prisons. In addition to aiding Union prisoners, Van Lew supplied money and shelter for those fugitives able to escape, including the February 1864 escape from Libby prison, which included 109 soldiers. She also functioned as the coordinator for Richmond's underground loyalists, plotted with Union sympathizers, and corresponded with Federal commanders during the 1864 Overland Campaign through numerous couriers, messengers, and scouts. Van Lew reported on Confederate troop deployments, the condition of military installations by encrypting her messages in a secret code with invisible ink.

Varon provides a convincing analysis of why Van Lew was so successful in her acts of espionage throughout the war. Mid-nineteenth century assumptions of gender and class shielded Van Lew, which led Confederate authorities to simply underestimate her. According to Varon, elitism and sexism disinclined

Confederate authorities to believe a frail spinster lady capable of politically significant acts of disloyalty. Such an analysis also challenges long-standing assumptions that Van Lew was mentally unbalanced. Such assumptions served to comfort members of Van Lew's own social class during the postwar period who concluded that only someone mentally unbalanced could provide aid and support to the enemy. Such a simplistic analysis tells us more about the climate of the postwar South and the continuing hold of the Lost Cause.

Varon presents a rich account of Van Lew's final years as she attempted to remain socially active in an atmosphere that continued to chastise women who challenged deeply engrained gender assumptions. Van Lew adjusted to the new opportunities and challenges of Reconstruction. She helped push for black civil and educational rights and the protection of white loyalists. In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Van Lew Richmond's postmaster, a post traditionally held by men and a post she held for eight years. Needless to say, Richmond's conservative white majority shunned her like the plague for the remainder of her life.

This highly readable book contributes to our understanding of important issues related to the Civil War, including the importance of Unionist activity in the South, the ways in which women responded to the demands of war and the role of espionage in the Union war effort.

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