

Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War

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Review

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Silber, Nina *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War*. Harvard University Press, \$29.95, hardcover ISBN 674016777

Untold stories

Author urges further study of northern women

In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Jo March learns not to call attention to her triumphs and accomplishments. After four years of war, the women of the North followed the example of the fictional Jo, rarely repeating the stories of their work during the war and returning to their lives, some seemingly unchanged, others irretrievably altered.

In **Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War**, historian Nina Silber has set the course to tell the stories of the women of the North. The book's premise, that women of the North were actively involved in the Union war effort, is at once simple and complex, and Silber constructs a solid framework to study their involvement. Silber's comprehensive efforts introduce us to women of various motivations, efforts and social classes. Within her framework of the continuum of involvement, Silber juxtaposes those women whose engagement was tentative and borne of necessity with those women who were as zealous as any man who joined to fight for the Union cause. Because women of the North have rarely been examined as a class, Silber has her work cut out for her.

For all readers, whether new to the topic or among those who have studied women's efforts in the war, the framework is helpful to see a fuller picture. The essence of the work offers support for our notions that black and white women in the North, although in most cases physically removed from the day to day interaction with war in their cities and villages and all that this implies, were touched and changed by the war in significant ways. An interesting dilemma existed especially for the women of middle and lower incomes, and women

without substantial property whose husbands had gone to war. Although thought to be better off than the southern women in similar positions, these women struggled to maintain their homes and families in dire situations caused by the life changes that the war brought to them. Still, seen even by the journalists and politicians of the time as better off than the women in the South, Northern women were often subjected to unfair editorials about not giving up enough for the cause.

We read about the summoning of the domestic forces to war as well as the conflict between the long-held roles and the new war-hewn roles for women. Women continued in their familial, economic, and community roles but also began to, in some cases tentatively and in others with gusto, adopt expanded economic, civic, political and familial roles. Silber helps to reframe the traditional roles of women by examining the new climate in which they were performed and the new roles as they related to and responded to new challenges and old needs. This articulation of how women weathered the change in roles speaks to the flexibility of Northern women and their commitment to do their part, and when necessary, more.

Silber uses this same technique, examining the conflict between long-held roles and new war-hewn roles for women, to probe many categories of women's work. Silber looks at the elasticity of domesticity as family lives once centered around a home and hearth were extended to the far away field or hospital. Women's words about their expansions in soldiers' aid work, caring for the wounded and infirm, and the changes caused by wartime emancipation draw a picture of lives challenged and changed. We see women moving into the civic and political front, understanding the limitations placed on their gender, and working both within these limitations and toward expanding boundaries. This expansion of roles and responsibilities opened new relationships between women and the state, paving the way for new ways to think about women and their capabilities and the evolution of women's citizenship.

The most important message of Silber's work is how much more there is to study about Northern Civil War-era women. Silber titillates our interest by drawing the picture of the continuum of reactions through the words of the women who lived it. When we check her sources we see that, although she introduces us to voices that cover the gamut and tell the story beautifully, Silber has only begun to tap the resources on women. The book lays a foundation and urges others to build upon it. Archives and private collections around the country

are replete with the stories of Northern women. It is up to us to help them tell their stories.

Meg Galante-DeAngelis teaches at the University of Connecticut. As a social historian, her search for a glimpse at our ancestors as people has led her to study the lives of the soldiers of the Civil War and their families.