

Civil War Book Review

Fall 2005

Article 32

Wild Rose: Civil War Spy

Kevin M. Levin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Levin, Kevin M. (2005) "Wild Rose: Civil War Spy," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 4 .
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss4/32>

Review

Levin, Kevin M.

Fall 2005

Blackman, Ann *Wild Rose: Civil War Spy*. Random House, \$25.95, hardcover
ISBN 1400061180

Southern surveillance

Bio emphasizes the intelligence Greenhow sent Beauregard

Ann Blackman, whose earlier books include biographies of Madeline Albright and spy Robert Hanssen, has written a lively and engaging study of arguably the Civil War's most famous female spy, Rose O'Neal Greenhow. While many Civil War enthusiasts are aware of Greenhow's contributions to the Confederate cause, Blackman tells a much broader story encompassing her life both before and during the war. The author makes little attempt to apply the analytical categories that have come to define recent gender studies by historians such as Drew G. Faust, Elizabeth Varon, and Catherine Clinton. Her failure to do so will no doubt limit interest on the part of academics, though the book's highly readable narrative will prove attractive to a wider audience.

Rose O'Neal Greenhow was born in Montgomery County, Maryland, in 1817. Orphaned at a young age, Greenhow eventually moved to Washington, D.C. where she lived with her aunt who ran a boarding house. While Greenhow is best known for her exploits during the Civil War, Blackman spends a great deal of time examining her early life. Greenhow was a strong supporter of slavery, which Blackman connects to the mysterious murder of her father John O'Neale by a family slave who was eventually executed for the crime. In 1835 Rose married John Greenhow, a physician and later a State Department librarian and translator. Their 19-year marriage ended tragically while John was working as a lawyer in San Francisco where he accidentally slipped off a section of planked road and fell to his death.

Marriage to a State Department official and her own feminine wiles placed her in the center of Washington high society and attracted some of the most

powerful public officials on the national stage, including, Senators Daniel Webster, Stephen A. Douglas, Thomas Hart Benton, Chief Justice Roger Taney, John Fremont, Presidents Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, James Polk, and James Buchanan. Future Confederate contacts included Jefferson Davis and General P.G.T. Beauregard. No one exercised more of an influence on Greenhow's political outlook than John C. Calhoun, the powerful statesman from South Carolina who served as senator, secretary of state, and vice president. In speaking of Calhoun, Greenhow described herself as a Southern woman . . . born with revolutionary blood in my veins, and my first crude ideas on State and Federal matters received consistency and shape from the best and wisest man of this century.

Greenhow's sympathies with the South only hardened throughout the turbulent decade of the 1850's. Her well-attended dinner parties occasionally erupted in political debate. During one such gathering following John Brown's unsuccessful Harpers Ferry Raid in October 1859 and his subsequent hanging, Greenhow responded to Abigail Adams (wife of presidential son Charles Francis Adams) who described him as a holy saint, a holy martyr. I have no sympathy for John Brown, Greenhow replied. He was a traitor, and met a traitor's doom. Her passionate support for the newly-formed Confederacy and her intimate connections in Washington made her an attractive candidate for covert operations following the first shots at Fort Sumter in April 1861.

It was on the eve of the First Manassas campaign that Greenhow enjoyed her moment of glory. In an 1863 letter written by Beauregard, he made it clear that prior to the first major battle on Virginia soil in July 1861, a female spy sent by Greenhow relayed an important message to Beauregard at his Fairfax Court House headquarters informing him of Union general Irwin McDowell's intention to advance on the roads toward Manassas on July 16. A few days later Greenhow sent the Confederate commander a second message, reiterating the contents of the original letter plus additional information. The information, according to Beauregard was sufficient to transfer Confederate forces under the command of Joseph E. Johnston to the Manassas area. As is well known, that decision contributed to a decisive Confederate victory on July 21, 1861. The following day, Greenhow received a letter of appreciation from Jefferson Davis.

Not surprisingly, Blackman emphasizes Greenhow's contribution to Confederate victory; indeed, the book begins with her exploits in the days leading up to the battle. According to Blackman, Had she not warned

[Beauregard] in time to prepare and strengthen his forces, the North would have won the First Battle of Bull Run and Lincoln might have clipped the insurrection in its bud. Informed readers will take this as a simplistic explanation of the wide-range of factors that contributed to Confederate victory on that day. In his most recent study of the First Bull Run, David Detzer (Donnybrook, 2004) downplays the importance of Greenhow's intelligence. Intelligence reports from Greenhow, according to Detzer, failed to include any information that Beauregard did not already possess and its contents did not indicate when McDowell would march, with what force, and from which direction. Commanders on both sides were receiving a steady stream of reports from multiple sources. Detzer speculates that Beauregard's post-battle account of Greenhow's contributions added a romantic touch to an otherwise drab military account, spicing up his dry prose with feminine derring-do[.] Regardless of alternative accounts, there is little doubt that Greenhow's intelligence reports contributed to the movement of Confederate troops in the days leading up to the battle.

Greenhow continued to supply Confederate agents with information, but this only heightened suspicion by Alan Pinkerton and his new secret service organization. On August 23, 1861, she was placed under house arrest; despite close observation by authorities Greenhow managed to continue to supply information to the South. In January 1862, Federal authorities transferred Greenhow and her daughter, Little Rose, to the Old Capital Prison where they held her for five months before she was exiled to the Confederacy. Shortly thereafter, Jefferson Davis sent Greenhow to Europe as an unofficial emissary with the goal of persuading Britain and France to recognize the government and negotiate a ceasefire. Blackman's coverage of this stage of Greenhow's career is enriched by the spy's previously unpublished European diary, which had been lost for more than 100 years. The author makes effective use of Rose's diary, which adds a great deal of detail and color to her time in Europe and audience with such important officials as Lord Palmerston of England and Napoleon III of France.

Having failed to convince the two nations to intervene on behalf of the Confederacy, Rose Greenhow boarded a blockade runner in September 1864 bound for Wilmington, North Carolina. As the ship approached the harbor it came under fire from a Union war ship and ran aground at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. While floating in a lifeboat to escape capture by Federal troops at Fort Fisher, Greenhow was tossed overboard by a strong wave. While many

were able to swim back to the boat, Greenhow had tied \$2,000 in gold bullion, money raised for the Confederacy, to her undergarments, and the weight sent her to the bottom of the sea. The next day her body washed ashore. Greenhow was given a military funeral in Wilmington where she was laid to rest.

Despite lingering doubts as to Greenhow's contributions to Confederate fortunes at First Manassas, Ann Blackman has written an entertaining account of the life of one of the Civil War's most recognized spies.

Kevin M. Levin teaches American history and the Civil War at the St. Anne's û Belfield School in Charlottesville, Virginia. He is the author of the forthcoming article, William Mahone, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History which will appear in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography.