

Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age During the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Coryell, Janet (2008) "Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age During the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.10.4.10

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/10>

Review

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Fall 2008

Ott, Victoria E. *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War.* Southern Illinois University Press, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9780809328284

Gender and the Confederacy

At the beginning of the best-known rendition of a Southern belle, *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara declares to her visitors, the Tarleton twins, that if they don't stop going on and on about the impending war, she will go into the house and leave them to amuse themselves. Scarlett's dismissal of the important topic was clearly anomalous, Victoria Ott would argue, as her research shows numerous Southern belles vitally interested in politics before the war, as well as during and after the conflict.

The Southern belle was a creation linked solidly to the Cult of True Womanhood and dependent upon the institution of slavery. When the American Civil War threatened that institution, Southern belles responded to the threat. Ott examines the lives of eighty-five young elite white women from all over the South who left behind diaries, letters, and journals recording their impressions and understandings of the changes they and their society underwent. While her sample size is limited, her work is firmly grounded in the historiography of the period.

Ott seeks to answer a series of questions in her monograph: What these young girls gained if the Confederacy won or lost if it was vanquished; how the girls saw their role at a time when their parents were involved in creating a new nation; how they used Confederate rhetoric about women to explain their actions during wartime; whether their support for the war lasted over the course of the conflict; and how these young women, whose late childhood and adolescence was so scarred by warfare, remembered the Confederacy and participated in the Lost Cause mythology that arose after the war.

Ott argues that these young women realized early on, in part due to their common educations in female seminaries as well as political discussions around the dinner tables of ruling white Southern elites, that slavery must be preserved and that the Confederacy must win if they wished to achieve their assigned--and greatly desired--roles as Southern "Ladies." Their early training at home and school reinforced the paternalistic culture that defined that role of Southern Ladyhood, and these elite young women were, on the whole, loathe to leave the role behind. They supported wholeheartedly the Cause and sacrificed gladly during the war, contributing their labor to soldiers' aid societies, participating in fund-raisers, caring for the wounded, and undertaking domestic tasks to share the work occasioned by fleeing slaves and absent fathers, husbands, and brothers. They often relished the increases in independence that came from lessened male supervision, but overall these young women remained committed to the basic cultural ideals of Southern Ladyhood and to marriage as their supreme goal. As was true for male Confederate supporters, young women viewed their reputations as resting in part on how honorably they performed duties in service to the war effort, and took seriously their domestic duties as their form of service.

The elite white women Ott examines found the flight of their slaves into Union lines and the Confederates' loss in April 1865 nearly inconceivable. These young women, so dedicated to maintaining the social structures that guaranteed them their roles as Southern Ladies, often seemed quite startled by the actions former slaves took to attain freedom and to preserve it against the southern whites determined to work them under conditions no better than slavery. Their writings reflect an increasing bitterness as ex-slaves reject the paternalism that white elite women viewed as an absolutely essential part of preserving Southern culture and Southern Ladyhood.

Ott's work illuminates further the lives of Southern elite young women, synthesizing nicely the existing research in the current state of the field. As has often been the case regarding research on the lives of real Southern belles, her work shoots down the Scarlett myth to provide a more complete picture of the lives of young elite white women that mythic figure represented.

Janet Coryell is Professor of History at Western Michigan University, specializing in U.S. women's history, antebellum partisan politics, and Civil War history. She is currently completing a textbook with Nora Faires entitled Women and America: An Integrated History for McGraw-Hill Publications.

